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Dialogic interplay: A strategy for representing difference and Cultural Diversity on stage, and Jump for Jordan: a play

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Dialogic Interplay: A Strategy for Representing Difference and Cultural Diversity on Stage, and *Jump for Jordan*: a Play

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

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by

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THESIS CERTIFICATION

I, Donna Abela, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Creative Arts, in the School of the Arts, English and Media, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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LIST OF SPECIAL NAMES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies (ADSA)

Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT)

Australian Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG)

Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP)

Community cultural development (CCD)

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)

Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS)

Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC)

National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA)

Non-English Speaking Background (NESB)

Playwriting Australia (PW)

Powerhouse Youth Theatre (PYT)

Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)

Sydney Church of England Girls' Grammar School (SCEGGS)

Sydney Morning Herald (*SMH*)

Theatre for Young People (TYP)

Theatre in Education (TIE)

University of New South Wales (UNSW)

University of Sydney (USyd)

Women in Theatre and Screen (WITS)

ABSTRACT

Dialogic Interplay: A Strategy for Representing Difference and Cultural Diversity on Stage is a practice-led research project that consists of a play *Jump for Jordan*, which had its premier production at the Griffin Theatre Company in 2014, and an exegesis. The purpose of the study was to discover dramaturgical strategies which could effectively place culturally diverse characters, and a lesbian protagonist, on an Australian main stage, and thereby address a gap in the contemporary Australian theatre repertoire.

The structure of *Jump for Jordan* is analogous to a disturbed archaeological dig site. Fragments of the narrative, and levels of the protagonist's psyche, collapse in on each other, appear out of sequence and context, and forge associations and meanings beyond temporal and spatial boundaries and denotative categories. This transmissible structure resists the ideological containment of difference or otherness inherent in traditional dramatic form, and emerged from a methodological engagement with feminist theatre practice which operates as a "sphere of disturbance" (Aston 1999, 18), and provided three active verbs - to oppose, to disturb, to activate - which became key tools in the creative dig for the play's nascent patterns, inner logic, and ultimate aesthetic.

The stages of an archaeological dig provide the five-part structure of the exegesis: *Evaluation* identifies the tenets by which the playwright wrote outside of her ethnic context, and contextualises *Jump for Jordan* through a discussion of the contemporary Australian theatre landscape; *Excavation* discusses how feminist tools were used to develop character, discern structure, create language-led associative causality, and activate dream logic and psychic space; *Disturbance* describes the challenges which steered the first draft towards the tragic mode; *Artefact* explains how the study of comic theory and language-led playwriting enabled the playwright to complete the work within a comic frame of play, reclaim an affinity for ironic and dark comedy, and identify the polyvocal "dialogic imperative" (Castagno 2001, 149) which has characterised her plays and playwrighting practice. *Analysis* summarises the audience and critical response to the theatrical production of *Jump for Jordan*.

This study concludes that feminist theatre practice, together with comedy's driving force of freedom, and the interactive "linguistic playing field" (Castagno 2001, 152) activated by language-led playwriting, provided the tools and dramaturgical strategies which enabled the playwright to write a play which effectively placed difference and cultural diversity on an Australian main stage. The resultant dialogic organising principle transformed *Jump for Jordan* from a sphere of disturbance into a sphere of being, from a mechanical to an organismic creation, which privileged a female and lesbian and Arabic-Australian subjectivity and psyche, and de-centred the monologic and authoritarian discourses of patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, and Orientalist xenophobia. However, reaching beyond the categories of sex and binary logic, the dialogic interplay which came to organise *Jump for Jordan* is finally understood and described not in feminist terms, but in playwriting terms, as "a way of governance through sharing" (Castagno, 2001, 14).

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Jump for Jordan

a play

Donna Abela

CHARACTERS

Sophie	A would-be archaeologist.
Sam / Student Sam / Truckie Sam	Partner.
Loren	Sister.
Mara / Young Mara	Mother. From Jordan.
Sahir / Young Sahir	Father. From Palestine.
Azza / Avenging Azza	Aunt. From Jordan.

SETTING

The play is set in Sydney's west and inner west. More broadly, it is set in Sophie's fluctuating levels of consciousness: reality, memory, dream, fantasy projection, and conversations with the dead.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Like the strata of occupation in a disturbed archaeological dig site, the scenes in this play are often constructed of layers of narrative that collapse in on each other. A sequential reading is interrupted, and only fragments of what happened are offered. Attention must be on context as well as content. The borders between scenes are intended to be porous.

LANGUAGE NOTES

Jump for Jordan is a bi-lingual play written almost entirely in English. Generally, when characters speak in their first language, the syntax is complex; when they speak in their second language, the syntax is simple. In the first production, accents were also used to denote first and second language. When characters spoke in their first language, actors used Australian accents; when characters spoke in their second language, actors used Arabic accents, and sometimes converted verbs to the present simple tense. Being a product of Sophia's imagination, and a caricature, Avenging Azza is an exception; her language is complex, and in production, was heavily accented in Arabic. Clarity in the bi-lingual scenes depends on knowing to whom each line is directed.

PART ONE: Inviting in the exile

1.

Present: Flat. Sophie rifles through clothes.
Past: House. Mara yells at Loren.
Past: Sophie's workplace. Loren yells at Sophie.

LOREN Mum was shattered when you left.

MARA Why didn't you talk to her? Why didn't you find out?

LOREN No warning. Just pissed off and dumped me in the shit.

MARA Sisters tells sisters everything!

LOREN Not one fight with Mum that week. Should've guessed.

MARA You knew. You helped her.

LOREN I copped it big time.

MARA Weren't a good enough sister.

LOREN Her guilt and crap.

MARA No phone number, no address, she could be dead in Kings Cross!

LOREN Drama queen!

MARA How could she do this?

LOREN Run away at twenty-one! Shit Sophia, no one does that.

MARA Books in a taxi! Bras in the gutter! Neighbours saw everything!

SAM Sophie.

SOPHIE What?

MARA You stupid

LOREN impulsive

MARA unmarried

LOREN brat!

A jet screams overhead.

2.

Imagination: Airport. Customs.

VOICEOVER Welcome to Australia, land of drought and sweeping drama queens. Anything to declare?

Avenging Azza enters and declares various weapons.

VOICEOVER Thank you. Enjoy your stay.

Avenging Azza nods and exits.

3.

Recent past: House. Sophie is at the door.

SOPHIE Mum. Do you have cancer?

MARA No.

SOPHIE Are you sick?

MARA No.

SOPHIE So, why the frantic call from Loren? Sophia get your arse over here now?

MARA Loren doesn't swear.

SOPHIE Does she have cancer?

MARA No.

SOPHIE She said the word emergency. I was literally imagining the worst on the train. Pussy sores, oxygen tanks.

MARA There's a wedding.

SOPHIE Oh.

MARA My second daughter is marrying first.

SOPHIE She could've mentioned it.

MARA The look on their faces.

SOPHIE What are you talking about?

MARA Vince's parents.

SOPHIE Vince is the groom?

MARA I told them. They couldn't believe it. My eldest daughter, I don't know where she lives!

SOPHIE You do know.

MARA For months I didn't.

SOPHIE And for three years, you totally disowned me. For the last three years, you acted like I didn't exist.

MARA Azza is coming.

SOPHIE Who?

MARA Your Aunt.

SOPHIE When?

MARA Next month. I'm coming to the wedding, pick me up, I'll be there on the sixth. As if she's my boss.

SOPHIE Aunty Azza?

MARA Fifteen years, no contact. Then she smells a wedding. Can't fly here quick enough.

SOPHIE She did make contact. She sent cards, remember, which you wouldn't let us open.

MARA Sophia. In Jordan, you could have been killed. Had your ears cut off for not listening.

4.

Present: Flat. Sam checks on Sophie who is up late rifling through clothes.

SAM Sophie.

SOPHIE What?

SAM Have you slept yet?

SOPHIE Do you think Mum'll tell her? She'll tell her. She's her sister. She has every right to tell her sister what happened.

SAM It's three a.m.

SOPHIE What if right now They're sobbing in my bedroom? If Azza and Mum are having this completely extreme empathy session? Which honestly, that's fine, it's their moment.

SAM Go to bed.

SOPHIE with Azza would've got through customs, would've seen Mum at the gate just Loren, not me, and she would've spent the whole car trip going, Where's Sophia? And Mum would've been like, Don't worry, we'll talk about it later. Trying to sway her from thinking, Where's Sophia? with stupid crap questions like, Are you good? Was the flight good? Was the weather good when you left Amman?

SAM I'm turning the light off.

SOPHIE I'm so gonna get pelted. Why'd you run away? Why don't you have a husband? Why are you such a brat?

SAM You're not a brat.

SOPHIE Not specifically, but -

SAM You're over-excited.

SOPHIE And my Aunt's nearly sixty. She'll be stuck in the dark ages, probably.

SAM Sophie, you're totally up for this. We've devised a plan. Gone through the whole meeting process.

SOPHIE Yep. Right. Chill.

SAM Keep it low key. Don't get provoked.

SOPHIE But what if it gets out-of-hand emotional?

SAM You lower your voice, you count to three, and say…?

SOPHIE Okay, I have to go, I'll call you tomorrow.

SAM Koala stamp. Good night.

SOPHIE But Sam, she's my Aunty. I was in school when I last saw her, primary school, I was like ten.

SAM Well, in that case, just spew your guts up. Guilt trips, tantrum attacks, not part of the plan, but I'm pretty sure you can handle it.

SOPHIE Really?

SAM No.

SOPHIE Okay. You're right. Thanks Sam. I'm on it.

5.

Recent past: House. Sophie is at the front door.

MARA The wedding. You have to come. Loren wants family. Azza will expect you.

SOPHIE Does she know I ran away?

MARA No.

SOPHIE Will you tell her?

MARA Will you move back home?

SOPHIE I knew you'd -

MARA Come home. Sleep here. I can measure you as I sew. Not have to unpick each time you visit.

SOPHIE Unpick?

MARA Your dress. You're one of five bridesmaids. We dropped one to make room for you.

SOPHIE Bet that went down well.

MARA Not interested? Okay. Go.

SOPHIE Wait. I'm a bridesmaid?

MARA Yes.

SOPHIE What are the dresses like?

MARA Off the shoulder, pleated bodice, cocktail length, in emerald.

SOPHIE That's hotter than I expected.

MARA Vince's sisters, all beautiful, all the same size. But you, look at you. Thick legs, long waist, no bust. I'll have to mix up three sizes to make your dress fit properly.

SOPHIE Primmed up and pretty. Good luck.

MARA Too hard? No problem. Leave.

SOPHIE Mum -

MARA Three more years, go.

SOPHIE All I meant was, I'm not super girlie, I'm not good in heels, I'll just -

MARA You can pick your own shoes.

SOPHIE Really?

MARA They have to be black.

SOPHIE Fine… Do you really want me in the bridal party in front of potential relatives?

MARA … Yes.

SOPHIE Mainly because of Azza, right?

MARA And Loren.

SOPHIE And afterwards?

MARA You can keep the dress.

SOPHIE Oh.

MARA And maybe...

SOPHIE Come for Christmas?

MARA Let's do the wedding first.

Mara exits.

Imagination: Sahir enters.

SAHIR Jordan means the one who descends.

SOPHIE Dad?

Sahir walks. Sophie follows.

6.

Imagination: Sahir and Sophie walk.

SAHIR I bought the highest block of land. A quarter acre on top of the hill. I walked from Campbelltown station. The road was brand new. Sticky with bitumen and still without street lights. When I found the display home, I sat on the front step. Other people arrived with sleeping bags and sandwiches, but I was the first.

SOPHIE Dad, did you ever have insomnia? It feels like withdrawals, but I don't know from what? If it hits three a.m. and I'm still awake, I go for a walk like we used to. And I think of you walking out of the lowest depression on earth. Up through the Rift Valley, treading on artefacts, probably, I so wanted to discover.

SAHIR I stayed awake all night. When the saleslady came in the morning, I signed the contract, gave her a cheque for all the money we had. Then I ran through paddocks of grabbing grass up to our block on the top of the hill. The wind was strong! My clothes were like whips!

7.

Present: Flat. Sophie still rifling through clothes.
Past: House. Mara yells at Loren.
Past: Sophie's workplace. Loren yells at Sophie.

MARA Ring someone! Where is she? Who is she with?

SOPHIE Sam?

LOREN You're a complete dick.

MARA In the street like a bag lady!

LOREN What the fuck were you thinking?

SOPHIE You awake?

LOREN You've left me with Mum. One on one. That sucks.

MARA I wanted children who would not shame me like this!

LOREN Did it feel liberating shoving your life into garbage bags?

MARA Treating my trust like rubbish!

LOREN You left knickers on the lawn. We had to pick them up with tongs.

MARA Unforgivable.

LOREN This is the dumbest fucking thing you've ever done.

SOPHIE Sam?

MARA From this minute, my disgraceful daughter does not exist!

SOPHIE I think I'm having a panic attack.

A jet screams overhead.

8.

Recent past: House. Sophie and Mara.

MARA I should measure you. For the dress.

Mara grabs a tape measure and starts measuring.

MARA Stand there… Stand still… Move home.

SOPHIE Mum -

MARA Your room is all ready. Like you never left in front of the whole street with no husband.

SOPHIE Please don't -

MARA If you move home, you can sleep in all morning. Sip coffee on the patio with Azza who is old now, older than me, maybe even dead soon, and you'll never see her again.

SOPHIE Mum.

MARA Then I have to tell her. Azza, Sophia left home, lives with strangers, left neighbours shaking their heads, too disgusted to talk to me.

SOPHIE Mum, I'll visit Aunty every day if you want... but forcing me back home, I'm sorry, it's off the table.

MARA One month.

SOPHIE No.

MARA .

SOPHIE Aunty obviously will want to know why, so, how about… whatever story makes it less terrible, I'll back you up, okay? Just tell me what you want me to say.

MARA … Okay. Say… you left home with no husband to study. Your university was far away. Your classes were at night. Trains to Campbelltown are full of dangerous rapists. Say that.

SOPHIE Okay.

MARA And this flatmate person you live with.

SOPHIE Samantha.

MARA Samira. You met her at church. You go to church. Never miss. You watch romantic movies. Plan weddings and practice hair-dos.

SOPHIE Clearly.

MARA And you work at the museum.

SOPHIE I actually don't have my degree yet.

MARA What?

SOPHIE I've repeated some subjects. I'm doing my last one.

MARA Don't say that! Say you work at the museum. Your job is important.

SOPHIE Can we lie about me as little as possible?

MARA Your job is impressive. But at night. The trains are still full of dangerous rapists, so you must live in the city to be safe.

SOPHIE Mum, I sell gold pens to manicured barristers at David Jones.

MARA Sophia, your Aunt teaches at the best school in Amman.

SOPHIE And you didn't even teach us Arabic!

Pause.

MARA Remember in Jordan when a man in the traffic was rude to Azza?

Imagination: Avenging Azza enters.

AVENGING AZZA Peak hour. He was driving like a maniac. Lanes? What lanes? He swerved. Cut in front. Cut me off. I pulled him out of the car by the neck. I threw this public enemy infidel onto his knees and delivered a disciplinary beating!

SOPHIE I don't remember -

AVENGING AZZA If someone does wrong, I teach them a lesson. This is normal for me, Sophia. A day to day activity.

Imagination: Avenging Azza exits.

SOPHIE Mum, leaving home, in Australia, it's what people do.

MARA In Jordan, the law would let us tie you up and drop you down a well.

SOPHIE .

MARA You're an odd shape, Sophia. I hope I have enough fabric.

Mara exits.

9.

Present: Flat. Sophie dresses to meet Azza. Sam gathers her things for uni.

SOPHIE What if my Aunt slams the door in my face? Turns her back on me? Oh God, if she does, I'll completely -

SAM Sophie, I know you think this, but you're not the source of all evil.

SOPHIE I ran away.

SAM You left home when you were twenty-one.

SOPHIE I literally fled.

SAM Years ago. Ancient history, babe.

SOPHIE It's not. It still hurts Mum. It's the first thing she'll blurt out all over Azza. And Azza, I bet she's horrified, sharpening knives -

SAM Japanese ones are the best, apparently.

SOPHIE Sam, I'm totally right about this.

SAM You are totally talking shit. What you're freaking out about is based on -

SOPHIE Experience.

SAM Not recent experience.

SOPHIE No, but -

SAM Could you recognise your Aunt in a crowd?

SOPHIE … If I studied the noses I might -

SAM You don't know her at all. So don't go there expecting some kind of slut-shaming hate-fest. It could be really cool. Arms flung around poor prodigal daughter. Knives turned into tuning forks. Cue music.

SOPHIE That won't happen.

SAM Your Mum broke three years of silence. Your Aunt's flown in from Jordan. How is that not promising?

SOPHIE But -

SAM It's just a visit. Stick to what we rehearsed. Leave the rest in the lap of the Goddess.

SOPHIE Okay.

Sam is ready to head out the door.

SOPHIE Wait. How do I look? Ironically retro and self aware?

SAM Amish.

SOPHIE Hey, remember how I used to dress?

SAM Punk lite.

SOPHIE Indi-goth, but I kind of regret it now, rejecting Mum's stupid wog view of women like that. She was strict, but she never pushed me into an arranged marriage or anything.

SAM You were free to find me.

SOPHIE A chick who lived in her lab coat.

SAM You complaining?

SOPHIE I'm remembering... the particles of dust sitting on your eyelashes.

SAM Dust from all the places we'll go to next year. Troy, Ephesus, Petra.

SOPHIE If I'm not killed.

SAM Bored now. Bye.

SOPHIE Where are you going?

Sam holds up her assignment.

SOPHIE Oh my God, your last assignment. That's awesome. I forgot.

SAM I know.

SOPHIE You'll have two degrees. Two in the time I took to do one.

SAM Good luck. I'll call you.

SOPHIE Thanks. You've been amazing. Have you got fifty bucks?

SAM ?

SOPHIE Twenty?

SAM ?

SOPHIE Train fare?

SAM Are you broke?

SOPHIE No.

SAM You can't be broke.

SOPHIE I'm not.

SAM You've been saving up.

SOPHIE I have, for our big trip which is absolutely on the cards next year.

SAM Did you go shopping?

SOPHIE Sam, my face, my skin! Seriously, I'm breaking out really badly. I just needed some Clarins.

SAM What else?

SOPHIE Nothing. Some clothes. New boots. Loren's wedding present. A present for Aunty. That's all. Make-up. That's all. Special shampoo so my hair doesn't frizz -

SAM Make-up?

SOPHIE But I've got textbooks. Herodotus. I'll get through my last subject, go to Gould's bookshop after the wedding and sell them and pay you straight back.

SAM Credit cards?

SOPHIE Maxed out.

SAM Right.

SOPHIE But we're totally still going to Petra. I'll save up and be binge free, I promise. But right now, it's like I'm about to travel back to where my family come from, and I want them to look at me and feel proud of me and not harass me or be ashamed.

SAM I'm sorry, but that frock is stupid.

SOPHIE I know.

Pause.

SAM Your guilt needs its own bedroom.

SOPHIE I know.

Pause.

SAM Every single Christmas you're crushed.

SOPHIE Yes. And if I'm disowned again, I don't think I'd cope.

Sam gives Sophie some money.

SOPHIE As soon as I get paid, I'll -

SAM It'll be brilliant, Sophie, it'll be epic.

SOPHIE Will it?

SAM Yes. Except for the bit about Herodotus. You've already sold your copy. Flog my copy, and you will be killed, okay?

Sam exits.

10.

Present: Garage. Sophie finds Loren smoking in Sahir's car.

SOPHIE Loren.

LOREN Shit!

Loren stashes the cigarettes under a book, then realises it's Sophie.

SOPHIE Does Mum know you smoke?

LOREN Trust you to sneak up.

Loren lights up again.

LOREN Did you walk?

SOPHIE Walk?

LOREN From the station. You were supposed to call. You were supposed to be picked up. I picked Aunt Azza up. I do all the driving. I drive Mum to Liverpool to shop so no one here sees her and asks Where's Sophia?

SOPHIE Did she tell Aunty about me?

LOREN You're so gonna cop it. They sobbed all night because of you. Heavy duty hysterical.

SOPHIE I knew it.

LOREN It's like SBS in there. No English. Can't understand a word.

SOPHIE How's Aunty?

LOREN She comes out of customs, and Mum transforms. Ultra Arab. One minute she's cooking Vince steak and chips, next thing she's asking me where to buy goat. Vince won't eat goat.

SOPHIE What'd she say?

LOREN I put biscuits out. Mum lost it. Said Arabs use this special order when they serve visitors.

SOPHIE They do?

LOREN Food's food. Who cares?

SOPHIE Maybe we do. With visitors, didn't Mum ever - ?

LOREN Visitors? Mum cut ties, Sophia. She doesn't go out now. Not even to bingo. Invited no-one to the wedding. Vince's extended family is coming. A whole village from Italy.

SOPHIE Aunt Azza's here.

LOREN She's a gate-crasher. And you're a deliberately difficult self-centred brat. You left me in the firing line. You owe me, Sophia. Big time.

Imagination: Sahir enters.

SAHIR The Jordan depression is a unique geographical feature.

SOPHIE Dad?

Sahir exits. Sophie follows him.

11.

Imagination: Sophie walks with Sahir.
Past: Young Mara enters holding a bunch of native flowers.

SAHIR I picked up your Mum from the airport. I kissed her for the first time in two years, then gave her a bunch of flowers I'd grown myself. We took the train, then walked for ages to our hilltop block of land. The footpaths were still clumps of clay, so we took our time, counting cows, jumping over ditches.

Past: Young Mara surveys the location of her new home.

SAHIR Mara, look. Those trees left standing together, They're called ironbarks. They're putting a park there... This is called kangaroo grass. It flowers at Christmas… And this, this is where our front door will be…

to our children-to-be
to your home with me
peace

Past: Young Mara glares at Sahir.

SAHIR Darling, take your shoes off. Land in this land with me.

Past: Young Mara is appalled. She drops the flowers and exits.

SOPHIE Once you landed here, you only looked forward. So why am I always looking back?

SAHIR Jordan is the most invaded place on earth.

SOPHIE I wish you weren't dead.

Sahir exits.

12.

Past: University. Student Sam enters wearing a lab coat.

STUDENT SAM When did you go to Jordan?

SOPHIE I was ten. My first big trip. My only big trip.

STUDENT SAM Why Jordan?

SOPHIE Mum's from there. Dad's from Palestine. He escaped or something. Walked north to Lebanon.

STUDENT SAM Tell me everything you remember.

SOPHIE … Me crying because Dad wouldn't come with us… Mum getting upset at every place she took us. Mum and my Aunty having this massive fight…

STUDENT SAM Intense.

SOPHIE Yeah.

STUDENT SAM What else?

SOPHIE No Dead Sea, no Red Sea, no camel ride.

STUDENT SAM Good memories? You must have some.

SOPHIE … How my Aunt held my hand as she showed us her school… Hookah pipes in cafes and how really weird that looked. Me and my sister flying kites up on the Citadel.

STUDENT SAM You just saw Amman?

SOPHIE Mainly, but we did drive to this ruin where fake gladiators whacked the shit out of each other.

STUDENT SAM Did you get to Petra?

SOPHIE I wish.

STUDENT SAM I'd love to go. Twist between cliffs and outrun the flash floods.

SOPHIE I'm definitely going. But God, the cost. You know Courtney?

STUDENT SAM That North Shore glamazon?

SOPHIE Yes. She went on the Pella dig. Four grand gone in three weeks. Pennies from her inheritance. But I totally have to go.

STUDENT SAM Out of the lab and the library, into the field -

SOPHIE Actually excavating.

STUDENT SAM Touching what we've studied.

SOPHIE Feeling the harsh sun heating everything up.

STUDENT SAM If we woke up there, we'd see the temples flush.

SOPHIE Would we?

STUDENT SAM When the first flash of sun hits them, apparently they flush and look like They're moving.

SOPHIE I'd love to go.

STUDENT SAM We could go for coffee. Discuss the desert over dessert.

SOPHIE If I could walk on the land Mum and Dad came from, I might discover deeper connections…

STUDENT SAM Canoodle over some strudel.

SOPHIE … or unearth things that... (Registering Student Sam's comment) What?

13.

Present: Garage. Loren smokes in Sahir's car.

LOREN Fuck, I hate this car. No air bags. His brother knows this bloke. Insurance jobs. He offered to torch it.

SOPHIE Torch Dad's car?

LOREN Four grand Mum would've got. She couldn't pay for anything.

SOPHIE Mum made the bridesmaids' dresses, Loren. She bought all the fabric and

LOREN Vince's parents were shocked. They're very traditional. They got over it for Vince's sake. They're paying for everything.

SOPHIE Your fat corporate whore salary could've paid for something.

LOREN I bought my wedding dress.

SOPHIE Yeah, Mum showed me. A 70 percent off 80s reject. Fetching.

LOREN .

LOREN Remember that fight Mum and Azza had? We were playing. We heard a crash in the kitchen and ran in. Found the table on the floor, flipped over, on top of our dinner. That was Azza.

SOPHIE We don't know that.

LOREN Instant Jekyll and Hyde on drugs. Aunty snaps.

Imagination: Avenging Azza enters.

AVENGING AZZA You public enemy infidel! Get out! I'm going to throw you to your knees and beat you! Drop you down a well and spit on you! Cut

your stupid impulsive ears off, trample you with camels until I break your will... This is normal for me, Sophia, a day to day activity.

Imagination: Avenging Azza exits.

LOREN Aunty can't comprehend it. You leaving home and living with strangers. Being a sneaky arty farty weirdo who'll die poor like Dad did.

SOPHIE Dad did his best.

LOREN Dad had two daughters. Two weddings he didn't save up for. Migrants don't do that. Vince's Dad's concreting business is worth a mint.

Loren stubs out her smoke, freshens her breath, locks everything in the glove box.

SOPHIE They're not in national dress, are they?

Pause.

Loren ululates, and laughs at Sophie's reaction.

14.

Present: Garage. Azza enters, a cosmopolitan woman in modern dress.

AZZA Layla?

SOPHIE Aunty?

AZZA Sophia, you look just like Layla. Your lovely wild hair, the shape of your face.

SOPHIE Sorry. No Arabic.

AZZA Do you know about Layla?

SOPHIE Are you good?

AZZA It's good to see you, good to be here with my nieces who have grown into such beautiful young women.

SOPHIE Was the flight good?

AZZA Come, come inside. You look tired. Are you tired? I made your mother wait. No coffee, I said. We're going to wait for Sophia. She complained, of course, but I insisted.

SOPHIE Was the weather good when you left Amman?

AZZA Oh Sophia, you couldn't look more like Layla if you tried.

Sophie is overwhelmed.

SOPHIE Ok. I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow.

Sophie exits.

AZZA ?

LOREN She does that.

Loren walks towards the house, then turns to Azza.

LOREN (With an exaggerated gesture) Come.

Loren exits. Azza follows.

PART TWO: Masquerade

15.

Present: University. Sam drinking takeaway coffee.

SOPHIE She acted like she was happy to see me.

SAM So why'd you run?

SOPHIE It threw me. I'd been so afraid, you know, expecting hell to break loose.

SAM You have to go back.

SOPHIE I will. I want to. She wasn't angry at all.

SAM That's great.

SOPHIE I think she was happy to see me. Because when she saw me, she didn't see the tantrum-throwing addicted bad person that Mum probably said I was... She could see that I'm actually really humble and quiet.

SAM Well -

SOPHIE That I'm a good Arabic girl… who doesn't live at home, which would still shock her… But this is the thing that I think a western society doesn't understand. It's rare here, but in Jordan, and I imagine it's the same in Italy or Greece or wherever, there's a huge sense of family spirit. We're genuinely close.

SAM Close?

SOPHIE It's not that we have to be like this, it's that we are. But here, you're challenged by so many external factors that make you question things, and there's nothing wrong with that, that's good. But here you don't have that same sense of family, you know, you just don't.

SAM .

Sam exits.

16.

Present: House. Sophie and Loren enter with coffee and sweets. Mara is everyone's translator.

SOPHIE Is there rigmarole?

LOREN Just do what Mum does.

They serve Mara and Azza. Mara indicates her disapproval. They try different things until Mara approves, and the conversation can resume.

AZZA And Sophia, what do you do?

MARA Sophia works at the Australian Museum. Don't you?

SOPHIE ?

MARA You work at the museum. It's the biggest one in the country. The best one.

AZZA What do you do there?

MARA She works on projects. You work on projects.

SOPHIE Yes, apparently.

AZZA But what does Sophia do? You said she worked at night. Is she a security guard?

MARA A what?

AZZA Security guard.

MARA Azza, my daughters have done exceptionally well without your help. Loren manages company accounts. Sophia works on important projects.

AZZA At night?

MARA Yes at night. Why do you work at night?

SOPHIE I don't know.

MARA Think.

SOPHIE Well, we obviously, we share laboratories on a rotating basis.

MARA Sophia's laboratory is available only after dark. Only a select group of people can access it.

AZZA In secret?

MARA Yes.

AZZA Why?

MARA Why's your job secret?

SOPHIE ?

LOREN Selling pens is so politically sensitive.

MARA The politics. It's highly sensitive.

AZZA What politics?

MARA … Afghanistan.

SOPHIE ?!

MARA Sophia leads a team, a team of experts who, they restore priceless treasures damaged by the war.

AZZA The war fought ten thousand miles away?

MARA Yes Azza, obviously, They're in Australia because They're safe.

AZZA How did they get here?

MARA How did you get here? They crossed the sea.

AZZA Legally?

MARA Of course.

AZZA On the black market, artefacts buy guns. In Syria right now They're being dug up and traded for weapons. Sophia, are you sure the property you're working on hasn't been looted?

SOPHIE Mum?

MARA Your Aunt would like more sugar. I trust Sophia as much as I trusted you.

AZZA It's a fair question.

MUM Sophia's museum is respected, internationally respected and, they have an agreement. The property will be restored at no cost to Afghanistan and returned when all the fighting stops.

AZZA Okay, so UNESCO's involved. You should've just said.

SOPHIE Did she say UNESCO?

MARA Who are they?

SOPHIE If there's a war, they go in and protect a country's heritage.

MARA Good. Your museum works with UNESCO.

SOPHIE Why?

MARA They gave you things from Afghanistan to fix.

LOREN What a clever little checkout chick.

AZZA Sophia, the artefacts, which era are they from?

SOPHIE Help.

MARA What things do you fix? From what time?

AZZA Afghanistan's been constantly occupied, hasn't it? So its heritage is not just a pile of pots.

SOPHIE I fix pots.

MARA Not pots!

SOPHIE I don't know. Sculptures? Clay sculptures?

MARA Clay sculptures.

SOPHIE Graeco-Buddhist.

MARA Graeco-Buddhist sculptures.

AZZA Ah! Sophia, did you know that the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was ordered by the supreme court under the Taliban?

SOPHIE What?

MARA Something about the Taliban.

Imagination: Sahir enters.

SAHIR But Sophia Loren emerged from the rubble.

SOPHIE Dad?

Sahir exits. Sophie follows.

17.

Imagination: Sophie walks with Sahir.

SOPHIE It's wall-to-wall Arab in there, but can I understand the language Mum's lying to her sister in? No. I can't even make hummus.

SAHIR Everything you see, I owe to spaghetti.

SOPHIE I doubt she ever said that, Dad.

SAHIR After the war, Italian films were about surviving awful everyday life. The occupation, the damage, the desperate hunger. The people hated those films, they were depressing, but hope rose up from the destruction and rubble.

SOPHIE Sophia Loren.

SAHIR The most beautiful woman in history.

SOPHIE Why'd you name your babies after a sex symbol from Italy? Why didn't you give us Arabic names like virtuous devout faithful virgin unto death?

SAHIR She had a humble beginning. Overcame poverty and sickness. Played modest characters, salt-of-the earth.

SOPHIE In escapist films that made everything shiny and nice.

SAHIR Yes.

SOPHIE I know more about a movie star than I know about you.

18.

Present: Sophie brings a moment of family history to mind.
Past: Airport. Near the end of the runway, under the flight path, Young Mara screams at Young Sahir.

YOUNG MARA Sahir, we had a house, my half of my father's house in Amman, in the capital city of a modern Kingdom. Now we have what? A filthy bedsit on the other side of the world... You have work, you have friends at the factory, come home whistling nice happy tunes because you're thinking of that horrible block of wind and cow shit you expect me to live in. What do I have? A landlady who blocks the corridor with her bulk. Strangers who sneer at the food I cook. A husband who grows little sticks in little jars for a garden that will never smell as sweet as the irises and jasmine you grew for me in Jordan.

YOUNG SAHIR Land in this land with me.

YOUNG MARA Arabic!

YOUNG SAHIR Mara -

YOUNG MARA Speak Arabic to me!

YOUNG SAHIR I can't. It cuts my tongue. I choke on the blood. It digs up the dead. English is our home now, our future. English is clean.

YOUNG MARA Don't do this.

YOUNG SAHIR Mara, peace is possible here. You're smart, darling, you'll learn English quickly. I'll teach you.

YOUNG MARA Don't do this, Sahir, strand me in my own language, crying all day and unpacking nothing. I have nothing to put away in the home I don't have!

Young Mara exits.

YOUNG SAHIR Mara!

Young Sahir exits.

A jet screams overhead.

19.

Past: University. Student Sam in lab coat methodically cataloguing artefacts. Sophie enters.

SOPHIE It's her fault I'm failing. How can I not fail?

STUDENT SAM Your exams?

SOPHIE Whole subjects! I'm still failing subjects from first year.

STUDENT SAM Brutal.

SOPHIE How can they not be a write off with all the yelling that goes on? It's massively bad, it's awful. I'm always in the wrong because I don't prop up the patriarchy in the way she wants me to. It stresses me out and I snap at her and just make it worse.

STUDENT SAM What happened?

SOPHIE Mum found my results, found blazing proof that I lie. I do lie. I lie every semester. I really want this degree, but she accuses me, thinks I'm having random orgies with everyone, keeps me locked inside her virgin-whore dichotomy.

STUDENT SAM Sounds like you passed Women's Studies.

SOPHIE Got a credit. But Mum saw the other marks, fail fail fail, and went ballistic. I just can't stay within her pre-defined parameters!

STUDENT SAM You could just move out.

SOPHIE If I could, I'd defer uni, get a job doing anything, and just get the hell out of there.

STUDENT SAM Do it.

SOPHIE I'm not married.

STUDENT SAM So?

SOPHIE I've written to my Aunt. The one we visited in Amman. If she sponsored me to study or work in Jordan, then maybe I could leave home and escape my mother without getting married first.

STUDENT SAM You can move to Jordan, but not Glebe?

SOPHIE Yes.

STUDENT SAM Don’t get it.

SOPHIE Over there, I'd still be in the family nest. It’s woggy logic, but how else can I be single and leave home and assert my autonomy from the dominant order in a way that Mum can accept and tell her friends about?

STUDENT SAM Have you heard from your Aunt yet?

SOPHIE Not yet. I think she’s ignoring me.

STUDENT SAM Where’s the evidence to support that?

SOPHIE I’m just speculating.

Pause.

Shows her an artefact.

SOPHIE What is it?

STUDENT SAM Interrogate the artefact.

SOPHIE Just tell me.

STUDENT SAM Weight.

SOPHIE You just weighed it.

STUDENT SAM Weight.

SOPHIE I don’t know. Less than a kilo? Four hundred grams?

STUDENT SAM Length.

SOPHIE It’s... as long as my hand.

STUDENT SAM As wide as your palm.

SOPHIE Yes.

STUDENT SAM Distinguishing features.

SOPHIE Nobs.

STUDENT SAM Nipples.

SOPHIE ?

STUDENT SAM It's a nipple-based incense cup.

SOPHIE Oh, a cup with

STUDENT SAM One on each corner, see?

SOPHIE What's it for?

STUDENT SAM The worship of Baal.

SOPHIE The Old Testament devil.

STUDENT SAM Or the esteemed Canaanite Lord. Depending.

SOPHIE Yeah.

STUDENT SAM Point of view.

SOPHIE Always.

STUDENT SAM It's linked they think with fertility rites.

SOPHIE Right.

STUDENT SAM With offerings...

SOPHIE Offerings…

STUDENT SAM to renew the...

Kiss.

20.

Past: Student Sam and Sophie from the previous scene, kissing.
Present: House. Mara translates for Azza, Loren and Sophie.

LOREN Concrete. Vince works in his Dad's business.

MARA Vince works in construction, in his Dad's business, building shopping centres, skyscrapers.

LOREN He's nearly paid his house off.

MARA He's rich. He'll inherit everything.

LOREN His parents are paying for the reception. Conca D'oro Lounge. Doves will fly out of the cake when we… yeah, when we…

AZZA What?

MARA She can't wait to cut the cake.

AZZA Her face didn't say that.

MARA I know what she said.

AZZA I know what I saw.

MARA I know my daughter.

AZZA Loren, who is Vince? What inspires him? What does your heart say when it sees him?

LOREN ?

MARA What's Vince like?

LOREN Soccer, pizza, X-Box.

MARA No stupid, what's Vince like as a person?

LOREN He's nice to me.

MARA Nice?

LOREN He's strong, physically strong. Lots of lifting.

MARA What else?

LOREN He's punctual.

MARA Punctual?

AZZA Is Vince too wonderful for words?

MARA Vince adores her. He's a very attractive man who is protective and reliable and… Loren?

LOREN Suntanned.

MARA ?

LOREN He works outdoors.

MARA Vince loves being outdoors, in the sun, and travelling to, to sunny destinations.

AZZA .

MARA She's just nervous. Wedding jitters.

Loren takes the heat off herself.

LOREN Ask Sophia about her flatmate.

Student Sam exits.

LOREN We've never met her. She could be living with a child-killing porn star.

AZZA Something about Sophia?

MARA Sophia has a flatmate. Samira. She's a good girl. They met at church. Went to uni together.

AZZA Lovely. What's she like?

MARA What's Samira like?

SOPHIE She's bright. Funny and serious. Thoughtful and caring. But not smothery. When she's curious about something, you can't stop her. And she has this amazing gift for bringing history alive.

MARA She's nice.

AZZA Her face didn't say.

MARA For God's sake! I know what she said.

Mara exits.

AZZA Does Sophie have a boyfriend?

Azza exits after Mara.

21.

Present: Flat. Sophie updates Sam.

SAM What's she been saying?

SOPHIE That my family on Mum's side, They're not money from money, They're money from hard work and intelligence and contacts. Aunty's school, it's the equivalent of SCEGGS. And Mum didn't get married until she was thirty-something, remember, because on her side, career was always pushed. Which is why my second cousins haven't all just walked into like, whatever, labourer jobs. They're all bright and career-focused, all studying brilliant things, and all topping their year.

SAM I can't wait to meet them.

SOPHIE When?

SAM Next year. Troy, Ephesus, Petra. You've got cousins over there. That's so cool.

SOPHIE Second cousins.

SAM Yeah, who we can connect with. They can show us the city.

SOPHIE They're not obligated.

SAM Obviously, but they'll totally want to hang out with us. Exploring Amman, swapping gossip. And They're bright, right? So they'll pick it up. They'll ask you about me.

SOPHIE You?

SAM Us. And you can tell them all about our pokey home under the flight path, our desperate longing for a dog, our lack of talent for same-sex salsa.

SOPHIE But Sam, things are patched up now, fully reconciled nearly.

SAM Perfect timing.

SOPHIE No, seriously, my family's reaction'd be… they'd kill me… it'd kill them.

SAM Older relos, maybe, but -

SOPHIE My second cousins would -

SAM They're young and educated and -

SOPHIE Their issues would be things like, hair removal, and do you go to night clubs? Do you get drunk? But that's it. They're bottled. Their mindset wouldn't expand further than that. If we said anything about, you know…

SAM Being lesbians?

SOPHIE Parents would be told. We'd have to take our life in one chunk and throw it over a cliff and wipe it out of everyone's mind.

SAM Or live our lives without them.

SOPHIE It's not like that in Jordan.

SAM You don't live in Jordan.

SOPHIE .

SAM I've never been a closet case, Sophie.

SOPHIE You've never had to be.

SAM But, you're loved, I love you, wouldn't your family be thrilled to know that?

SOPHIE A hundred percent no way in hell.

SAM Really?

SOPHIE Really.

SAM Is such a family worth having?

SOPHIE My family's been through war and occupation and poverty -

SAM Not your Mum’s side.

SOPHIE You don’t even know them!

SAM That’s right. I have a mother-in-law I haven't met, a sister-in-law whose wedding I wasn't invited to, an Aunt-in-law who doesn’t even know I exist!

SOPHIE They’re not your in-laws.

SAM .

SOPHIE Not actually.

Pause.

SAM Would you marry me? Would you? If I proposed right now, promised to love you forever exactly as you are… what would you do?

22.

Present: Azza shows photos to Sophie and Loren.
Past: Young Sahir calls Mara from a payphone. He is on the run.

LOREN Is that Mum?

AZZA This was their honeymoon.

SOPHIE Is that the Dead Sea? Mum?

LOREN Wow.

SOPHIE Salt icebergs!

LOREN Was this your honeymoon?

SOPHIE That white is blinding.

LOREN Going somewhere dead after your wedding sounds wrong.

SOPHIE It’s popular.

LOREN Noosa’s better.

SOPHIE Check out the cozzie! You look incredible, Mum.

LOREN Happy. Actually happy.

AZZA Does Loren ever smile?

MARA Why did you bring these?

AZZA Why haven't they seen them?

SOPHIA Why haven't we seen these?

AZZA Remember when you got engaged? Sit with us, Mara. Look how happy you look.

MARA Look how long that lasted.

LOREN Oh my God.

SOPHIE That's me.

LOREN Your prettier twin.

SOPHIE That hair.

LOREN Frizz factory.

SOPHIE Mum? Is that Layla? Dad's sister?

Mara snatches the photo out of their hands.

YOUNG SAHIR Mara, Layla's dead. Shot in the camp. I've been going to the camp. I'm sorry. I'm walking north. I'm sorry…

Past: Young Sahir exits.

AZZA Do they know about Layla?

SOPHIE Can I make some copies?

MARA No.

Mara exits.

23.

Past: University. Sophie and Student Sam are studying an artefact, a bull box, by drawing it.

SOPHIE Dad said my curls were a gift from Layla, his sister. I'm her spitting image, apparently. She died before I was born. In Palestine. Or Jordan. I don't know. What about your family?

STUDENT SAM Irish-Scottish Aussie.

SOPHIE Migrants.

STUDENT SAM Way back. Potato famine refugees, Calvinist crackpots, we don't know.

SOPHIE Don't you want to know?

STUDENT SAM I want to finish this assignment.

SOPHIE Me too.

They resume drawing, until…

SOPHIE Who do you look like?

STUDENT SAM My Dad.

SOPHIE What does he do?

STUDENT SAM Drives a truck.

SOPHIE Where?

STUDENT SAM Everywhere... We have this thing. Every summer holiday, he takes me on the road with him. Until I turned vegan, we'd live on lamingtons and battered savs. Yeah, gross, but incredible. The pick of the season in the back of the rig. Mangoes, avocados, cherries. I love it. The independence of it. Coming home with Tibooburra dust on your dash.

SOPHIE Desert dust.

STUDENT SAM In your clothes, up your nose.

SOPHIE Hey, our Dads both crossed deserts.

STUDENT SAM Yeah.

SOPHIE Imagine if they'd met. They might've found something in common.

STUDENT SAM Maybe. Because a roadhouse, I always thought, if you magnified it by a million, it'd kind of be like what Petra was. A pitstop where travellers on different roads can rest up and trade stories over steak sandwiches.

SOPHIE Kebabs.

STUDENT SAM Kebabs.

Student Sam smiles, and resumes drawing, until…

SOPHIE I'm bored!

STUDENT SAM Why do you think we're drawing?

SOPHIE Because our lecturer's a douchebag?

Student Sam holds the bull box under Sophie's nose.

STUDENT SAM This bull box is made of what?

Student Sam waits until Sophie really looks at the artefact.

SOPHIE Clay?

STUDENT SAM Describe the surface.

SOPHIE Polished, but not super polished?

STUDENT SAM All over?

SOPHIE Yes?

STUDENT SAM It's polished on the outside, burnished, probably with a tool, right?

SOPHIE Right.

STUDENT SAM But inside, those of us who are drawing it can see slight ridges, a rougher texture, marks possibly left by someone's thumbs.

Sophie looks.

SOPHIE You're right. You're the shit.

Student Sam resumes drawing until…

SOPHIE Bulls are connected to Baal, right?

SAM .

SOPHIE Courtney reckons she saw Baal. At Pella when she went on that dig. She said she saw him as large as life sitting on the end of her bed carrying a very exotic flowerpot.

SAM .

SOPHIE (Mimicking Courtney) On a dig, I have all these dreams, vivid dreams, They're practically visitations!

Student Sam gives up, and shuts her up with a kiss.

24.

Present: House. Sophie is showing Azza some drawings.

AZZA You drew these?

SOPHIE This is a pottery theatre ticket. Well, my dodgy drawing of one. Pottery, you know, (mime) clay… hands… make.

AZZA Make.

SOPHIE They made clay tickets, sold clay tickets for the theatre.

AZZA ?

SOPHIE (Mime) Comedy, tragedy, to be or not to be. Theatre.

AZZA Theatre.

Mara enters.

AZZA Have you seen Sophia's drawings? Artefacts from Afghanistan.

SOPHIE No, not Afghanistan. Sorry, should've said, these were found in Jordan.

AZZA Jordan?

SOPHIE At Pella. My uni sponsors a dig there.

MARA Her museum sponsors a dig there.

AZZA Why is she drawing artefacts from Jordan?

MARA They're from her previous job. Before her promotion.

AZZA When?

MARA Last year.

AZZA But this is dated this year. See?

MARA Why are you drawing artefacts from Jordan?

SOPHIE My uni assignment.

MARA Not uni. You work at the museum. You work for UNESCO.

SOPHIE Not this again.

MARA Don't you.

SOPHIE No. No, Aunty. No UNESCO. It's not true.

AZZA No UNESCO?

MARA Sophia.

SOPHIE No, Mum. Can we just tell her please, and stop this?

Mara exits.

SOPHIE Aunty... I work in a department store. Some customers treat me like I'm their servant. My supervisor cuts my shifts if I don't gift wrap in the regulation fashion. My manager wears red polyester shoulder-padded jackets and cuts my shifts if I don't use these hard-sell phoney American techniques which I hate and refuse to use because I respect people's right to shop unharassed. I earn twenty dollars an hour and loathe every minute of it... But telling you, Aunty, I'm a bit relieved, you know, because, I don't know... I don't like lying to people I adore.

Pause.

AZZA No Afghanistan?

SOPHIA No.

AZZA Thank you.

Azza exits.

25.

Present: Flat. Sam enters with a packed bag.

SAM Dad called.

SOPHIE Oh.

SAM Did his usual pitch. Be my summer offsider, Sam. Camp under the stars, wake up to the sizzle of baked beans and bacon fat… and we started crapping on about me being a vegan princess and him being a boofy carnivore… and it was mad, you know, that fun between us… and it felt… He makes me feel like I'm a part of his world. And yes, you're not my father, you're my lover, and no, I'm not into smothery clingy joined-at-the hip shit, but… I don't feel like I'm part of your world.

SOPHIE Are you -

SAM I get why you can't be honest about me… but being cut out of your life, even part time… I need to think about it.

SOPHIE Is this a break?

SAM Dad's doing the Darwin run. Up through the desert. I've said no for the last three years… but I love those long hauls.

SOPHIE Is this a break up?

SAM I'll probably be out of range a lot.

Kiss.

SAM I hope the wedding…

Sam exits.

PART THREE: Peace offering

26.

Present: Garage. Loren is chain-smoking.

LOREN We're having a comedian at our wedding.

SOPHIE .

LOREN We saw him at Vince's cousin's nephew's wedding. He sings that yodelling song. Tells jokes. He's funny. Not too expensive.

SOPHIE .

LOREN The venue has this new menu. Edible flowers. Every course. We picked banana blossom salad with chicken. Salmon with nasturtium vinaigrette. And two desserts. Vince picked orange mousse in tulip cups. I picked lavender cranberry crisps. Vince wanted Italian. Tiramisu. But Vince -

SOPHIE Vince Vince fucking Vince! You just, you think you're so entitled to talk about him constantly, even though he's massively rude and arrogant, and doesn't lift a finger, or touch Arabic food. He made Mum make steak and chips!

LOREN Chickpeas don't agree with him.

SOPHIE He's come once to meet Aunty, once. Takes zilch interest in his new in-law who crossed oceans especially to meet him.

LOREN He's nearly my husband! Best wishes on your engagement! It's fucking lucky I'm not allergic!

SOPHIE What are you talking about?

LOREN The flowers.

SOPHIE What flowers?

LOREN The waratahs. From Aunty Azza.

SOPHIE Aunty sent flowers?

LOREN Wall-to-wall. You can't move in there. They're just gonna die!

SOPHIE Loren, are you alright?

Imagination: Sahir enters.

SAHIR The waratah is known to be a very difficult plant.

SOPHIE Dad?

Sahir exits. Sophie follows.

27.

Present: House. Sophie is surrounded by flowers.
Imagination: Sahir arranges waratahs in a vase.
Past: House. Young Mara enters with a suitcase and glares at Sahir.

SAHIR My waratah cuttings always died. But then I read up on it. Take a cutting when the shrub is flush with growth. So I mixed existing soil with new soil and leaf mulch, then planted the healthiest cutting I could find. In the months ahead, I watered it regularly, kept my eye on the soil so that it never dried out. In time, with care, it bloomed.

SOPHIE Dad, Sam's surrounded by flowers, too. In a truck on a highway hugged by wildflowers, probably. Because it's started raining in the outback, Dad. Flash floods. Sam's gone, Dad. Sam left me.

YOUNG MARA I left you, Sahir. I went to Jordan with the girls and left you for good. I wasn't on holiday. I wasn't coming back, but Azza wouldn't help. She sent me and the girls back. That's why I'm back.

Young Mara throws the waratahs on the floor.

YOUNG MARA Bring one more flower into this house, and I promise you, I will turn your garden to stone.

Young Mara exits.

Sahir picks up the waratahs and exits.

28.

Present: House. Sophie and Loren wait in the lounge room. Hippie music is coming from the kitchen. Azza enters, spreads a sheet of plastic on the floor, then exits.

SOPHIE What's the plastic for?

LOREN .

SOPHIE Maybe Aunty's hired a stripper, and the plastic's for, you know, whipped cream, as in, woo hoo, happy hen's night.

LOREN Maybe she wants to behead you.

SOPHIE .

SOPHIE Maybe she was in the PLO. Maybe she was some sort of operative.

LOREN Maybe she was the first lady suicide bomber who blew herself up making chastity bomb belts on her kitchen bench.

SOPHIE Loren. Chill.

LOREN I am chilled.

Pause.

SOPHIE What if it's an Arab thing?

LOREN What if what is?

SOPHIE You know, messed up mindsets like… Mum forcing Dad to drive to the airport and be hysterically yelled at… Aunty flipping over a table full of food -

LOREN What is this, fucking Family History Month?

Azza enters stirring a pot.

AZZA Loren, next week is your wedding, a joyous occasion, so let's celebrate! Mara!

MARA enters.

AZZA Mara, let's pamper your precious daughter. Let's dance, sing and break a couple of chairs, because that's what it's about, before a wedding, being extravagantly happy.

MARA .

AZZA Clearly, a foreign concept… Sophia? Loren? The food's ready. Please bring the food in.

SOPHIE ?

LOREN ?

MARA .

AZZA (Mime) In the kitchen. Food.

SOPHIE (Mime) Food?

AZZA (Mime) Bring it in here.

SOPHIE (Mime) Go get the food?

AZZA Please.

Sophie and Loren exit. Mara grabs for the pot.

MARA I'll do it.

AZZA No.

MARA I'll do it.

AZZA No.

MARA Give it to me. We could be sisterly about this. But what do you do? Kick me out of my kitchen. Push the table against the door. Dig around in my cupboards. I had to drink from the garden hose like a dog!

AZZA Why are your daughters so miserable?

Off, Sophie and Loren exclaim with delight. They enter with food.

SOPHIE Pavlova!

AZZA With pomegranates and mint. Wahibe's variation.

MARA Wahibe?

AZZA You don't know Wahibe? She sells coffee and sweets at Macarthur Square. I followed my nose. Found a translator I could trust.

LOREN Pad Thai?

AZZA I want to cook up a storm, I said, all Australian food. Wahibe wasn't sure what Australian was but, Azza, she said, have a seat, have a coffee. I'll ask my customers.

SOPHIE Tiny pies.

LOREN I love pies.

AZZA Beef and shiraz.

SOPHIE This lamb smells super awesome.

AZZA Cumin lamb cutlets with grilled peach chutney.

LOREN Can we start?

MARA No. Don't eat it. Don't touch it. This is my house. I'm the cook. Loren, Sophia, come.

LOREN But the food's ready.

MARA It'll be ready when I make it.

SOPHIE You're kidding, right?

MARA Come.

LOREN But Aunty's gone to all this trouble.

MARA Azza is trouble.

SOPHIE She's made special food for us.

MARA Don't eat that.

SOPHIE But Mum, Aunty's slaved all day. It's rude and pretty crazy to not thank her by enjoying it. I'm not passing this up.

Sophie eats.

SOPHIE Oh my God.

MARA Loren, come.

LOREN No. Suffer. You will anyway. You wreck everything.

Loren eats.

LOREN This is amazing.

SOPHIE These pies / are

LOREN Try the lamb, it's / so

SOPHIE Oh my God.

LOREN Seriously, it's / totally

SOPHIE Aunty.

LOREN Amazing.

SOPHIE Thank you, this is / so

AZZA Darlings, it's a pleasure. Eat up. Mara. Join us.

Mara glares at Azza.

SOPHIE Hey. I've worked out what the plastic's for.

LOREN What?

SOPHIE Food fight.

Sophie and Loren laugh.

Azza stirs the pot.

AZZA Okay, this is ready. Shall we begin?

SOPHIE Loren!

LOREN What?

SOPHIE That's wax! I'm out of here!

LOREN Wax?

SOPHIE You know, for… (demonstrates). It's cultural. It's torture!

AZZA Loren.

SOPHIE You! She wants you!

AZZA If we were in Jordan, you'd trust us with your beauty.

SOPHIE It must be a wedding ritual.

AZZA We'd encircle you, create a salon of pure indulgence, and pamper you until you glowed with our love.

SOPHIE You're going to be stripped!

AZZA Some traditions must be defied, but not this one.

SOPHIE Blotchy and hobbling and red raw and -

LOREN How stripped?

SOPHIE Aunty? (Mime) That wax, how far up?

Azza gestures up to the eyebrows.

SOPHIE She's going to denude you! Which, Loren, that's great. I mean, it's so personal and ethnically meaningful and... Oh my God! This is so funny. She's the stripper! Aunty's the stripper!

AZZA Shall we begin?

Loren cracks a lame joke.

LOREN No skin off my nose.

Loren steps onto the plastic.

AZZA Sophia?

SOPHIE Me?

AZZA Yes.

SOPHIE On there?

AZZA Yes.

SOPHIE No way.

LOREN But it's so ethnically meaningful.

SOPHIE Shut up.

LOREN Come on.

With dread, Sophie steps onto the plastic.

The girls brace themselves. Azza applies wax to Loren. The effect is surprisingly soothing.

SOPHIE Is it revolting?

LOREN …

SOPHIE It's gross, right?

LOREN …

SOPHIE Sticky and repulsive and -

LOREN No… it's weird… but good weird… kind of like a second skin.

Azza tears a strip off Loren's leg. Loren yelps. They laugh.

Mara exits.

29.

Present: House. Alone on the patio, Mara overhears Sophie and Loren.

SOPHIE (Off) Okay, waxing is hideous. I mean, I've got serious skin damage. My pores are panicking. I'll probably get some nasty bacteria.

LOREN (Off) Or warts. Warts grow from injured skin.

SOPHIE (Off) Shit. I'm so gonna be covered in them. But that atmosphere, that bond, it's ironic, isn't it?

LOREN (Off) What is?

SOPHIE (Off) The way Arabic women care for each other's bodies and get naked together. It's tradition, such a liberating thing to have, and yet They're so not liberated in their mindset.

Azza enters with a plate of food.

AZZA Lovely night.

MARA .

AZZA You should eat.

MARA .

AZZA Can I show you something?

Azza takes out a letter and reads some of it to Mara.

AZZA ... I'm desperate to get to Jordan... to sip coffee at Petra in the half-darkness until the sun hits the cliffs... If I could come and live with you... if you could introduce me to anyone in antiquities, I might be able to set myself up... I really want to be good at something I love…

MARA Sophia wrote to you?

AZZA Five years ago.

MARA About living with you?

AZZA About work. Did you translate it for her?

MARA She didn't tell me about this.

Pause.

AZZA Did she get my reply?

MARA .

AZZA I'd look after Sophia. Arrange meetings, interviews, work experience.

MARA .

AZZA It's a standing offer. No hurry. No conditions. No need for her to worry about the cost of anything... Will you tell her? Mara? If Sophia's still interested, I'm offering to take her to Jordan.

Pause.

MARA She doesn't speak Arabic.

AZZA She doesn't speak it yet.

Pause.

MARA Sophia.

Sophia enters, followed by Loren.

MARA You wrote to Azza?

SOPHIE Once.

MARA You wrote to my sister?

SOPHIE Only about work.

Pause.

MARA Azza is willing to take you to Jordan.

LOREN What?

MARA She will look after you. Arrange meetings, interviews, work experience. She'll pay for everything you need.

SOPHIE Really?

MARA You'd have to work hard.

SOPHIE I would. I'd work like a dog. When can I go? Not in summer. Their summers are stifling. They usually get cholera. Do they still get cholera. Where would I live? Would people really give me a job? Aunty, oh my God, this is so -

Azza kisses Sophie, and exits.

Pause.

MARA There's a condition.

SOPHIE … Okay.

MARA You have no Arabic.

SOPHIE I'll take classes, those intensive ones.

MARA I'll teach you.

SOPHIE No, there's a community college that -

MARA No. Azza wants me to teach you. She insists.

SOPHIE That you teach me?

MARA At home. You'll move home and learn from me, until your Arabic is not an embarrassment. Azza insists.

SOPHIE But that could take years. I have flatmate obligations, a lease and

MARA Azza insists. That's the offer. You're free to say no.

Mara exits.

Pause.

LOREN You'll have to get naked.

SOPHIE What?

LOREN In Jordan. You'll probably wax Aunty, then she'll do you.

SOPHIE You think so?

LOREN You'll have to go with tradition.

SOPHIE Some of the time, otherwise I'll -

LOREN Visit relatives.

SOPHIE Sure, who don't know me, out of respect and -

LOREN Get checked out.

SOPHIE Well obviously They're going to be curious. Who's that Australian girl living with Azza?

LOREN She'd be your Mum over there.

SOPHIE Not that I really need -

LOREN Introducing you. Spreading the word.

SOPHIE Like, not nasty word.

LOREN Sophia's single.

SOPHIE An archaeologist.

LOREN Even if you looked like a dog, that'd be it.

SOPHIE What would be it?

LOREN If you came across in the remotest way nice -

SOPHIE Which I would.

LOREN Like a nice person, then yeah.

SOPHIE Yeah?

LOREN Cousins, nephews, male friends who want a wife.

SOPHIE Wife!

LOREN Queuing up. Their mother's on the phone. Hello Azza?

Imagination: Avenging Azza enters.

AVENGING AZZA Hello?

LOREN Can my husband and sixteen children come with me to visit?

AVENGING AZZA Why?

LOREN Hairy Toothless Tarek is interested.

AVENGING AZZA Sophia! Put some clothes on! Hairy Toothless Tarek is interested!

SOPHIE No way.

LOREN The whole tribe will come over. Check you out over coffee and sweets.

SOPHIE No.

AVENGING AZZA Do you like him Sophia? Do you like the look of him Sophia?

SOPHIE No. I'm free to say no. I'm going there to work.

LOREN At first.

SOPHIE That's the offer.

LOREN That's what you think.

SOPHIE ... You think there's a plan?

LOREN A plot.

AVENGING AZZA Hello. Is this Hairy Toothless Tarek's mother? This is Azza. Sophia's Aunty. She is very interested in Hairy Toothless Tarek. Can I come now and visit?... Good. Let's discuss the engagement, and the bride price.

Imagination: Avenging Azza exits.

SOPHIE What plot?

LOREN To arrange you, you idiot. Restore Mum's honour. Make you respectable behind your back.

Loren exits.

PART FOUR: Panic

30.

Present: House. Sophie is alone on the patio.
Past: House. A compacter can be heard in the backyard. Mara is alone.
Sahir enters.

MARA They measured out the area for the slab. Started digging. Excavating. That's what they called it. They dug down, removed rocks and roots, then got this machine to punch the dirt flat.

Sahir looks out the backdoor.

When they finish, I have to hose the dirt. That way, tomorrow, when they pour the concrete, it won't dry out too quickly and crack.

Compacting sound stops.

SAHIR My garden.

MARA Patio.

SAHIR Why?

MARA I warned you.

SAHIR Why?

Mara exits.

Pause.

SOPHIE Dad, Aunty might be plotting to arrange me.

Pause.

SAHIR Look. The kebab van at the petrol station's still open. Let's go.

Sahir walks.

31.

Imagination: House. Avenging Azza enters with a very exotic flower pot.

AVENGING AZZA Of course it's a plot. All of a sudden I'm nice to you? Work it out. Here. Have a present.

SOPHIE What is it?

AVENGING AZZA A very exotic flower pot.

SOPHIE Didn't Courtney see Baal carrying a very exotic flowerpot?

AVENGING AZZA Yes. He's waiting. Hurry up.

SOPHIE Baal is waiting?

AVENGING AZZA Baal's your fiancé. Now stop being a checkout chick loser prostitute, and come.

Imagination: Avenging Azza exits.

32.

Present: House. Sophie is alone. Loren enters.
Past: Amman Citadel. Young Mara and Young Sahir in love.

LOREN Sophia. Mum's gone.

SOPHIE What?

LOREN Mum's missing.

SOPHIE Did I fall asleep?

LOREN Sophia! I don't know where Mum is!

SOPHIE Okay. It's okay. Does she normally go - ?

LOREN No.

SOPHIE But where could, is there a place where - ?

LOREN She stays home.

SOPHIE The mall maybe?

LOREN She never goes out, Sophia. Only when I drive her.

SOPHIE But a friend, an old bingo friend?

LOREN She cut ties.

SOPHIE With everyone?

LOREN Yes.

SOPHIE Alright. Maybe she just -

LOREN An accident. Call the police.

SOPHIE Wait. What happened? Did something happen?

LOREN No. I don't know. I've looked everywhere, in every room, outside, in the garage. It's like she just got up and flew away...

BOTH Airport!

Past: Amman Citadel. Young Mara and Young Sahir survey Amman.

YOUNG MARA I love it up here. The feeling of being up here.

YOUNG SAHIR I love how you look up here.

YOUNG MARA Dusty.

YOUNG SAHIR Framed by the sky above our lookout.

YOUNG MARA What do you feel up here?

YOUNG SAHIR Love.

YOUNG MARA And?

YOUNG SAHIR More love.

YOUNG MARA (Shouting to the world) I love Sahir! … When I walk around these walls, when I see all of Amman, ancient and new, all swept together into one bustling vastness… see people stuck in traffic, entering hotels and cafes and mosques… think of my students flying kites across gravel that has Stone Age blood, sweat and tears in it… see our children-to-be smiling in your beautiful quiet eyes… standing here in the Citadel among all this... I can breathe...

LOREN She left without yelling. Left blazing silence. That's heaps worse than being screamed at because -

SOPHIE Loren. One of us should stay. If Mum comes back, and no one's here -

LOREN Right. Yep.

SOPHIE Goose chase.

LOREN Stupid. You stay with Aunty. If Mum turns up, call me immediately, okay? I'll come straight back.

SOPHIE Will you be -

LOREN Yes.

Loren exits.

Past: Young Mara shows Young Sahir the Citadel Inscription.

YOUNG MARA Have you looked at this?

YOUNG SAHIR What is it?

YOUNG MARA The Citadel Inscription. It's a tiny stone tablet inscribed with the promise of a God.

YOUNG SAHIR With words of weight.

YOUNG MARA Yes.

YOUNG SAHIR Maybe that's why it broke.

YOUNG MARA Read it to me.

YOUNG SAHIR Why?

YOUNG MARA I want to hear your voice restore the fragments of this promise.

YOUNG SAHIR ... and amidst its columns the just will reside …
... there will hang from its door an ornament …
... will be offered within its portico …
... and safety …
peace to you and peace

Young Sahir adds his own ending.

to our children-to-be
to your home with me
peace

Kiss.

YOUNG MARA Promise me that you'll stop going to the camp.

YOUNG SAHIR .

YOUNG MARA I don't want you hurt.

YOUNG SAHIR … I promise.

33.

Imagination: Outback. Sahir is at a roadhouse.
Present: Sophie can't contact Sam.

SOPHIE Dad, Sam's camping under the stars… On the side of a highway, standing there as monster trucks roar past, rip you up with their slipstream… Sam being out of range feels just like that.

Imagination: Truckie Sam enters with a kebab.

TRUCKIE SAM Sahir, aren't you supposed to be dead?

Sahir takes the kebab and has a bite.

SAHIR Excellent kebab.

TRUCKIE SAM The cook's granddad was Turkish.

Imagination: They share the kebab and trade stories.

SAHIR Where are we?

TRUCKIE SAM Little Afghanistan. Maree actually. But they called it that because cameleers crossing the desert would stop here to rest… until trucks made them redundant.

SAHIR Sophie said it rained.

TRUCKIE SAM Thunderstorms. Flash floods. It all drained into Lake Eyre, then summoned up the pelicans and whistling ducks.

SAHIR And the wildflowers?

TRUCKIE SAM All the way to the horizon. Sturt's desert peas especially. It felt like driving through endless streamers of red and green.

SAHIR Did you know the Sturt's desert pea is a ditch-dwelling plant.

TRUCKIE SAM Really?

SAHIR That way, the rain trickles towards them. They sprout quickly, flower quickly, then die quickly... leaving seeds dormant until the next downpour.

TRUCKIE SAM Petra channelled rain, too. The Nabataeans engineered this system of pipes and reservoirs, so in the middle of the desert, they could grow a lush garden refuge. A paradeisoi. A Paradise on Earth.

SAHIR I had a garden. Nothing but natives.

TRUCKIE SAM What happened?

SAHIR It was buried under concrete.

TRUCKIE SAM … Is that why you walk?

SAHIR Why do you drive a truck?

TRUCKIE SAM Well, flying up a highway, singing your head off, with the landscape constantly changing all around you, it's…

SAHIR Freedom.

TRUCKIE SAM Yes.

SAHIR That's why I walk.

TRUCKIE SAM … Sahir. Archaeologically, your garden's still there. Traces of it still exist. Seeds, minerals, pollen.

SAHIR It was a gift for my sister Layla.

TRUCKIE SAM It's still there.

SAHIR Good, Sam. Good.

34.

Imagination: Avenging Azza enters and rolls out a magic carpet.

SOPHIE What's that?

AVENGING AZZA Hop on.

Imagination: They do.

AVENGING AZZA I will hand you to Baal as a divine gift.

SOPHIE I thought you engaged me to Hairy Toothless Tarek.

AVENGING AZZA That's Baal's alias.

SOPHIE My fiancé needs an alias?

AVENGING AZZA Donkey pervert! Look where you're going!

SOPHIE What does Baal do?

AVENGING AZZA Insurance jobs. Torching things. The odd bit of pillage. His father built the business up from nothing. When you meet him, sign the marriage contract without persuasion, or we will feed your eyes to falcons, which tend to spoil the photos, so please don't. Hurry up, you hyena-headed slut!

SOPHIE When did I consent?

AVENGING AZZA I did.

SOPHIE To what exactly?

AVENGING AZZA Cooking him traditional delicacies, folk dancing on demand, being the vessel for his perpetual lineage... and never forgetting that chickpeas don't agree with him. Oh, and not mentioning that he's a false God. It's a touchy subject… Put your motherfucking foot down!

SOPHIE Folk dancing for a false God?

AVENGING AZZA Yes. And if Baal says squat down and give birth behind that bush, you squat down and do it. Quickly. Which reminds me, he likes to relax by having sex with his goat. Offer to hold it for him. It can get a bit frisky... See that? No blinker! Brain of a dead camel's dick!

SOPHIE I don't want to.

AVENGING AZZA Don't want to what?

SOPHIE Hold his goat.

AVENGING AZZA You have to. It's in the contract.

SOPHIE Which isn't signed yet.

AVENGING AZZA Darling, Baal is the king of calamity. If you displease him, he will crush your spirit and unleash wave upon wave of destruction.

SOPHIE I'm going home.

AVENGING AZZA What are you saying?

SOPHIE Baal can hold his own goat.

AVENGING AZZA Sophia! Don't do this. We can't take you back. We've already spent the bride price!

SOPHIE Stop! I'm going home now!

Imagination: Sophie jumps off the carpet, rolls it up, hands it to Avenging Azza and pushes her off stage.

35.

Imagination: House. Truckie Sam waits with a book. Sophie enters.

TRUCKIE SAM In Petra, there's a spring.

SOPHIE Sam.

TRUCKIE SAM It sprang forth when Moses whacked that rock and got water for the lost tribes. Well, legend has it.

SOPHIE How long have you been waiting?

TRUCKIE SAM Three years.

Pause.

SOPHIE If we met now, things'd be different.

TRUCKIE SAM How?

SOPHIE I wouldn't be crushed at Christmas.

TRUCKIE SAM What would you be?

SOPHIE I'd be with you.

Pause.

SOPHIE Why are you here?

TRUCKIE SAM To show you this.

Truckie Sam indicates the book.

TRUCKIE SAM Weight?

SOPHIE What?

TRUCKIE SAM Interrogate the artefact. The weight.

SOPHIE A few hundred grams.

TRUCKIE SAM Size?

SOPHIE As long as my hand.

TRUCKIE SAM Materials?

SOPHIE Paper, yellowish and brittle. The spine shows wear and tear. Stitching is missing. The language is... Arabic.

TRUCKIE SAM Are you sure?

SOPHIE I'll get that verified…. The cover is cardboard, torn, and illustrated… a girl looking up at a smiling cat… Alice in Wonderland.

TRUCKIE SAM You assume.

SOPHIE Yes, but there's other illustrations scattered... not scattered, printed at intervals… See? The Rabbit, the Hatter, the Queen of Hearts… It's an Arabic Alice… And there's handwriting, a name on the first page… Layla... Where did you get this?

TRUCKIE SAM Interrogate the artefact.

SOPHIE Tell me.

TRUCKIE SAM The find-context was...?

SOPHIE Just tell me.

TRUCKIE SAM Look harder.

Sophie examines the book, and finds a strip of cellophane.

SOPHIE Cellophane. One of those strips that you tear off packaging around tampons or CDs or... smokes. Was this in the glovebox? In Dad's glovebox in Dad's car?

Pause.

TRUCKIE SAM Your Aunt is coming.

Imagination: Truckie Sam exits.

PART FIVE: Reality

36.

Present: House. Azza enters and gestures for Sophie to sit. Azza places a small bundle between them, and speaks carefully in the little English she knows.
Past: Jordan. Young Sahir calls Young Mara. He is on the run.

AZZA Layla friend.
Amman.
Sahir Layla brother.
Sahir see Mara.
Love love love.

SAHIR Mara, Layla's dead.
She was killed in the camp.

MARA What?
What happened?

AZZA Layla.
Teach.
Refugee camp.

SAHIR A gunman on a motorbike.
Five or six shots.
The whites of her eyes.
Her body dropped
Her book took flight.
I caught it.

AZZA Children cry.
Bad life.
See bad.

SAHIR She was lying on the road.
Bent back legs.
The blood.
Keep breathing!
Keep breathing!

MARA Are you hurt?

AZZA Cry cry cry.
Layla make theatre.
Children happy.

Alice…
Alice…
Story.

SOPHIE Alice in Wonderland?

SAHIR In the ambulance.
Her hair everywhere.
I hold her hands.
Hold her book.
Layla hold on.

MARA Where are you?

AZZA Make theatre.
New story.
Queen make Alice wedding.
Alice think.
Bad wedding.
Stop wedding.

Alice think free.
Children think free.
Layla think free.

SAHIR I was beside her.
I watched her die.

AZZA Man.
Palestine man.
Gun.
Blood blood blood.
Layla die.
Sahir see.

SAHIR In the ambulance.
Her last breath.
Stop!
At the checkpoint
I jumped out
Watched the ambulance drive away.

MARA Where are you?

SAHIR I'm walking north.

AZZA Sahir go Lebanon.
No come back.
No no come back.

MARA You promised not to go to the camp!
You promised me!

SAHIR A Palestinian pulled the trigger.
My people are killing my people.
The gunman said I'd be next.

I'm walking north to Lebanon.

Past: Sahir hangs up and exits.

MARA No!

Past: Mara exits.

AZZA Layla die.
Azza go house.
Take (referring to the bundle).
Give Sahir.
No give.
Sahir die.

Give Sophia.

Sophie unwraps the bundle to reveal an old key.

AZZA Layla Sahir.
Father Mother.

SOPHIE My grandparents…

AZZA Palestine.
Jenin.
Refugee.
Run.

SOPHIE My grandparents ran.

AZZA House.

SOPHIE This key is from their house.

AZZA Palestine house. Nakba.

SOPHIE This is key to the house my grandparents ran from. Were driven from. The Nakba. The catastrophe.

AZZA Take.
Sophia take.
Sophia love.

Sophie picks up the key.

Off, Mara and Loren start yelling.

Sophie thanks Azza by kissing her on both cheeks according to Jordanian custom.

37.

Present: House. Mara and Loren enter yelling. Sophie and Azza try to intervene.

LOREN I don't love him. I'm sorry.

AZZA What happened?

MARA The wedding is off.

SOPHIE What's wrong?

LOREN I cancelled the wedding.

MARA She told Vince. She told his parents. She didn't tell me!

LOREN I knew you'd be like this!

SOPHIE When did you tell her?

LOREN I didn't. Vince's Mum called about the dresses. She went to their place. Bashed on their door like a maniac.

MARA They cried. They were disgraced!

LOREN They weren't. They've been kind to me, and concerned, and supportive because I honestly don't want to make two lives miserable.

SOPHIE Loren, that was really brave.

MARA That was stupid!

AZZA Don’t yell at them.

MARA Shut up!

AZZA Mara, I know you’re angry, but -

MARA She doesn’t love Vince. She doesn’t love him. She doesn’t know the freedom that gives her. Loren, call Vince.

LOREN No.

MARA Call him. Marry him.

LOREN I don’t love him!

MARA Forget love. With love, he can sway you.

AZZA Mara, stop, your daughter’s upset.

MARA My daughter is stupid. Loren, it’ll work, it’ll work better!

SOPHIE Mum -

MARA Shut up! Call Vince! Call him!

Azza quickly bundles Sophie and Loren out of the room.

AZZA Go. It’s okay. Go.

LOREN Vince’s parents lost their deposit on the Conca D’Oro Lounge, Mum, and they didn’t even bring it up!

Loren and Sophie exit.

38.

Present: House. Mara and Azza have it out.

MARA Loren is making a mistake, but what do you do? Take her side. What about my side? What about helping me for once? Standing by me?

AZZA I do -

MARA Really Azza? Really? If you did, I wouldn't be in this country.

AZZA What?

MARA You knew Sahir was going to Jenin. You didn't stop him. You didn't tell me.

AZZA I didn't -

MARA He asked you for books. What did you think he was doing?

AZZA I didn't ask him.

MARA You knew it was dangerous. You knew Layla had received death threats.

AZZA Mara, I lost my best friend. I lost Sahir to another country. I lost you, my sister, my only family, the chance to see those girls grow up.

MARA I lost everything! … When Sahir ended up in Australia, I begged him, come back to me, come back to Amman, to our beautiful life… I begged for two years… until I couldn't live another minute without him… But when I arrived in Sydney, found him speaking English, ignoring my Arabic, even our invented little love words, I died. When he built me a cockroach box in a paddock, left me in a suburb with other dumped mothers, I died. When he stopped growing irises for me, looked at me with blank eyes, I went to you in tears for help but you -

AZZA You abducted your kids.

MARA I came home to Jordan.

AZZA You ran away.

MARA I ran to my sister for help.

AZZA Did Sahir know? Did the kids? They didn't. That's abduction, Mara. You would have been extradited. Deported.

MARA You turned us away.

AZZA You had to face facts. Go back, tell Sahir, get a divorce, arrange custody. He was a good man who did his best. The least you could have done was be honest.

MARA How could you not help me?

AZZA You think I enjoyed watching your plane disappear?

MARA He lied to me.

AZZA He loved his sister. He believed in her work.

MARA I didn't marry this.

AZZA You were ambushed by history. Most people are, but most people don't sit down and rot in their own self pity.

MARA Get out!

Pause.

AZZA You'll lose Loren, you'll lose Sophia...

Azza exits.

39.

Present: Flat. Sophie and Loren enter. Loren has a suitcase. During the scene, Sam enters from the bathroom but is not noticed until she speaks.

SOPHIE Um, it's small.

LOREN Good location.

SOPHIE Noisy.

LOREN But getting to the city, it's so -

SOPHIE Convenient.

LOREN So close and -

SOPHIE You get used to the planes.

LOREN But that cafe you've got next door -

SOPHIE It makes these evil chocolate-bottomed cheesecake muffin things. We can go later.

LOREN Great.

SOPHIE Sit. Have a seat. The park's a dog park. Friendly people. I go there sometimes for a pat.

LOREN You pat people.

SOPHIE Dogs.

LOREN Joke.

SOPHIE I know.

Pause.

LOREN So is Samira - ?

SOPHIE This is the kitchen. Some of the other flats look out on brick walls, but this flat has this frangipani tree outside, so it doesn't feel so -

LOREN That's your bedroom?

SOPHIE Sorry, messy.

LOREN It was, wasn't it?

SOPHIE … You can stay.

LOREN Thanks.

SOPHIE Stay as long as you like.

They hug, awkwardly, probably for the first time.

LOREN Um -

SOPHIE I'll make us a cup of -

LOREN Where does..?

SOPHIE I think there's milk that's not off yet.

LOREN There's one bedroom.

SOPHIE Fortunately, yeah, it's on the sunny side, so -

LOREN Two beds or one?

SAM One.

Sophie ecstatically hurls herself at Sam, kissing her and welcoming her home. Loren waits awkwardly. Sophie eventually remembers Loren.

SOPHIE Loren... I'd like you to meet Sam. I'd like you to like Sam. Because I like Sam a lot. Actually, I love Sam. I love Sam, and I'm ridiculously glad you're back.

SAM Hi.

LOREN Hi.

SAM Cup of tea?

LOREN Yep.

Loren exits to the kitchen. Sam follows.

40.

Present: Flat. Sophie and Loren and Sam prepare for their evening.
Recent past: House. Mara reads and corrects Sophie's letter.
Imagination: Sahir enters and smiles at Sophie. He walks to the wall and removes a picture from a hook. He looks proudly at Sophie, then exits.

Sophie hangs the Nakba key on the hook.

Sophie takes out a notebook and practices the pronunciation of some Arabic vocabulary.

SOPHIE … bit tawfiq… ahlan wa sahlan… marhaba…

Loren enters.

LOREN Sorry, the babba ghanoush is a bit oily.

SOPHIE Shouldn't I cook?

LOREN You can't cook!

SOPHIE But you're the guest.

LOREN Just eat your 'ghanoush.

SOPHIE Mum sent my letter back.

Recent past: Mara enters.

LOREN You wrote to Mum?

SOPHIE Three sentences. Didn't I tell you?

MARA I pat the park on the dog.

SOPHIE I sent three basic sentences in baby-step Arabic.

MARA I have cake for eat the cafe.

SOPHIE She sent it back.

LOREN Typical of her to reject it.

SOPHIE No, she corrected it.

MARA Me bus city tomorrow took.

Recent past: Mara laughs to herself, and exits.

SOPHIE Look. In red pen. I expected a scathing rant, but I opened it and nothing, nothing furious, just fixed up grammar.

LOREN ... Should we ring her?

SOPHIE Do you want to?

LOREN Not particularly.

Sam enters, dressing, to pinch some dip.

SAM What time's your date?

LOREN Got to leave in an hour. What'll I wear?

SAM I bought a new pencil skirt. Might fit.

SOPHIE Blue though.

LOREN Don’t do blue. Thanks anyway. Where you going?

SAM Queer Film Festival’s on.

Sam exits.

LOREN Not joining her?

SOPHIE Not tonight. Got Arabic vocab to drill. Just can’t get the hang of it.

LOREN Do it.

SOPHIE … ahlan wa sahlan…

LOREN Nuh, shit, do it again.

SOPHIE … ahlan wa sahlan…

LOREN You’ll be fine once you’re over there, amongst it all, in Jordan.

Loren exits.

SOPHIE You think so?

LOREN (Off) Know so.

Imagination: Sahir enters with flowers. He places them on the ground at the front door.

SAHIR peace to you and peace

He smiles at Sophie.

SAHIR peace.

Imagination: Sahir exits.

Sophie resumes her practice.

SOPHIE … bit tawfiq… ahlan wa sahlan… marhaba…

THE END

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS
by Brett Boardman

Anna Houston as Sam and Alice Ansara as Sophia in Scene 23.

Camilla Ah Kin as Aunt Azza, Sheridan Harbridge as Loren, Doris Younane as Mara and Alice Ansara as Sophia in Scene 28.

Sheridan Harbridge as Loren and Alice Ansara as Sophia in Scene 29.

Sal Sharah as Young Sahir and Doris Younane as Young Mara in Scene 32.

Camilla Ah Kin as Avenging Azza in Scene 34.

Camilla Ah Kin as Aunt Azza and Alice Ansara as Sophia in Scene 36.

INTRODUCTION

THE ANALOGY OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL DIG

A friend of mine, years ago, had been a student of archaeology. As the daughter of Jordanian and Palestinian migrants, her dream had been to work in the Middle East digging up artefacts from ancient Arabia - her family's ancestral homelands. However, when visiting relatives offered to take her back to Jordan to rekindle her career, my friend was both elated and humbled, and thrown into a great panic. Six years earlier, at the age of twenty, she had run away from home unmarried. Was this a genuine offer, she wondered, or was it a family plot to lure her into an honour-restoring arranged marriage?

As a second generation Australian, I was intrigued by my friend's story. Her anxious efforts to negotiate an inscrutable but prescriptive parent culture evoked my own imperfect knowledge of my Maltese heritage, and reminded me of the wrong-headed cultural assumptions and internalised racism of my youth. As I listened to my friend, my imagination swirled with images of archaeology and occupation and deserts, and with themes of displacement and longing, paranoia and hope. As playwrights do, with my friend's permission, I made notes about her experience and placed them, magpie-like, with other notes for other possible plays in a proverbial bottom drawer. As I commenced this practice-led research, I retrieved those notes and began to develop my creative project *Jump for Jordan*. Archaeology would become more than the stalled career of the play's protagonist. It would provide the analogy of an archaeological dig which would structure the play, and serve as the organising principle of this exegesis.

SYNOPSIS OF THE CREATIVE PROJECT *JUMP FOR JORDAN*

Sophia, a young shop assistant, and would-be archaeologist, ran away from her home at the age of twenty. Her Jordanian-born mother, Mara, shamed by Sophia's abrupt and unmarried departure, disowned Sophia and cut ties with her own community. Three years later, on the eve of the wedding of Sophia's younger sister Loren, Mara needs to

save face in front of Aunt Azza who is visiting from Amman. Mara conditionally invites Sophia back into the family fold, and, desperate to be accepted, Sophia agrees to pretend that she is a conservator of cultural artefacts, and conceals the fact that she lives with her Australian girlfriend Sam. However, Sophia's fear of being disowned again, and her internalised racism, unleash a character called Avenging Azza, a stereotypical "mad Arab" who is keen to give her a disciplinary beating. When Aunt Azza discovers that Sophia works in a shop, rather than reprobation, she offers Sophia a trip to Jordan and the support she needs to kick start her archaeology career. Sophia's dream of unearthing antiquities in the Middle East is within her reach. However, Avenging Azza returns to restore the family's honour by forcing Sophia into an arranged marriage. Assisted by imagined conversations with her girlfriend Sam, and her dead father Sahir, Sophia overcomes her paranoid panic, and learns that her Aunt Layla was killed by militants in a refugee camp in Jenin. Recalling her archaeological training, Sophia interrogates this "artefact" and better understands her father's flight from Palestine, her mother's punitive bitterness, and her own sense of cultural displacement. Aunt Azza gives Sophia the family's Nakba key - the key to the house her grandparents fled in 1948 - which she hangs in her flat as she learns the Arabic she will use when she gets to Jordan on her own terms.

THE AESTHETIC OF *JUMP FOR JORDAN*

Jump for Jordan is set in Australia - in Sydney's western and inner western suburbs - and in Palestine and Jordan. More broadly, it is set in Sophie's fluctuating levels of consciousness: reality, memory, recollected family history, anxious projection, and insomnia-induced conversations with the dead. Like the strata of occupation in an archaeological dig site - the chronology of events indicated by the sequence of rock and soil deposits - these inner and outer experiences form the layers of the play. However, this dig site has been disturbed. Narrative layers fragment, collapse in on each other, and appear out of sequence. Scenes are porous, characters can cross narrative borders, and images and metaphors can resonate across temporal and spatial boundaries. Like the central character Sophie, audiences must participate in a type of dig to sift and contextualise each scene or layer in order to make sense of the whole.

PRODUCTION AND PUBLICATION OF *JUMP FOR JORDAN*

An early draft of *Jump for Jordan* won the 2013 Griffin Playwriting Award, a national prize awarded by the Griffin Theatre Company in Sydney which "recognises an outstanding play or performance text that displays an authentic, inventive and contemporary Australian voice" (Griffin Theatre Company 2015). The Griffin Theatre Company is the only professional theatre company in Australia dedicated to staging an entirely Australian repertoire, and this annual award, first bestowed in 1998, signifies the company's long-standing commitment to Australian plays and playwrights. It is a small mainstream company which sits within the financially precarious "small-to-medium" sector, between the big mainstream companies whose sizeable budgets are quarantined by their Australian Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG) funding status, and the resource-strapped youth, community and independent theatre sectors. In 2014, between the 19th of February and the 5th of April, *Jump for Jordan* was produced by the Griffin Theatre Company and staged at the SWB Stables Theatre in Sydney, and the Merrigong Theatre in Wollongong. A rehearsal draft was published by Currency Press in February to coincide with the production.

AWARDS FOR *JUMP FOR JORDAN*

In addition to the 2013 Griffin Playwriting Award, *Jump for Jordan* won the 2015 Australian Writers' Guild's AWGIE award for Stage. It was also nominated for the 2014 Sydney Theatre Awards (Best New Australian Work), the 2014 Glugs Theatre Awards (John West Memorial Award for Most Outstanding New Australian Performed Play), and the 2015 NSW Premier's Literary Awards (Multicultural NSW Award).

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS STUDY

Typically, in my artistic practice, a play is discovered in the patterns and dynamics that take shape when concepts, words, and characters are brought into relationship during the act of writing the first draft; it is lost in the fog of the creative process; and it is found again and fully extracted and understood once all that fog lifts. It is an artefact

which painstakingly manifests beneath layers of education, personality, socialisation, convention, imagination and research. That is, it is a product of the dig, of the writing process itself. Archaeological excavations are likewise subject to environmental vagaries and conditions. However, as the stages of a dig methodically lead to the discovery of an artefact and its context, they have been adopted as the analogous organising principle of this exegesis.

EVALUATION

In archaeology, a site is a place where human activity occurred or is occurring, and where objects made or used or modified by human beings can be found (Darvill 2008). In order to establish a reason to dig for these objects or artefacts, and to plan the process by which they will be discovered, the site is evaluated. It is surveyed, sampled, walked and mapped. It presents questions that must be answered.

In this exegesis, evaluation equates to my survey of the field of Australian theatre and playwrighting. In this section, I consider the creative project within a contemporary context, and identify the best way to approach the writing process. I do this by addressing two research sub-questions:

> *Can a writer write outside of their cultural or ethnic context?*
> *What kind of work makes it onto an Australian main stage?*

EXCAVATION

An excavation claims a site and gives it a boundary. It involves systematically exposing the site's stratigraphy or layered soil deposits, and then taking them apart (Darvill 2008). The site is organised into a grid which allows excavators to dig top down in precise horizontal and vertical units, commencing with the topsoil or overburden. This means that the layers are removed in reverse chronological order, from the most recent to the most ancient. The location of each artefact, and its relationship to other artefacts, features, and plant and animal remnants, is recorded. This provides context, the position

of an artefact in time and space (Darvill 2008), important knowledge about its physical and cultural circumstances.

In this section of the exegesis, I equate excavation with the process of writing the first draft of *Jump for Jordan*. I begin to investigate my key research question:

> *Can culturally-diverse characters be placed on an Australian main stage effectively by developing dramaturgical strategies influenced by feminist theory and aesthetics?*

I explain how I applied dramaturgical strategies within a feminist theatre context, and identified the play's emergent patterns and inner logic.

DISTURBANCE

Many activities can result in the disturbance of site. These may be natural events, such as flood, fire, erosion or earthquake, or human activities such as settlement, colonisation, warfare, vandalism and looting. When a site is disturbed, the damage is irreversible. The context is compromised, and vital information may be lost.

In this section, I discuss the disturbance created by the act of writing the first draft. This section addresses my exploration of dramaturgical death spaces and disinterments, the difficult feminist duty to be "the enemy of death" (Cixous 1991, 25), and the writer's over-identification with the troubling aspects of the narrative and subsequent loss of critical distance.

ARTEFACT

As mentioned, an artefact is an object made, used or modified by human beings. It is a part of humanity's material culture, and includes weapons, tools, utensils and ornaments (Darvill 2008). Once found, the artefact is bagged and labelled on site, and then taken to the laboratory to be cleaned, identified, cataloged and analysed (Fort Bragg 2016). In a

conceptual sense, the contextualisation of the object brings it into being, creates or re-creates it for contemporary appreciation.

The artefact found and created during this practice-led research is the play *Jump for Jordan*. In this section, I discuss the insights discovered by the completion of the first draft, and how these led me to change the genre of the play, and place its narrative within a comic frame of play. I explain how my exploration of the comic mode and dialogism restored my critical distance and capacity to complete the play on its own terms.

ANALYSIS

The analysis of the data discovered during an archaeological dig is more important than the dig itself, but contingent upon it. Archaeologists interrogate the objects, write reports which seek answers to the questions which emerged during the site evaluation, and present their conclusions to the wider community.

In this section, I describe the production of *Jump for Jordan* and its audience and critical reception. I evaluate the creative work in light of its reception, and the key research question, and offer conclusions.

IMPETUS BEHIND *JUMP FOR JORDAN*

The purpose of this practice-led research was to discover dramaturgical strategies which could effectively place culturally diverse characters on a contemporary Australian main stage. To be effective, these strategies would need to resist the ideological containment of difference or otherness inherent within traditional dramatic structures, and be well received by their intended audience.

Generally speaking, I wanted to undertake this project because culturally diverse characters had become remarkably absent from our main stages, and I wanted to make a diversity impact upon the Australian theatre repertoire. More specifically, however, I wanted to respond to the racism that had been directed towards Arabic-speaking or

Middle Eastern people in the wake of events such as the 2000 Bilal Skaf gang rape trial, the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre Towers in the USA, the 2002 Bali bombing, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the 2005 Cronulla riots. I had become increasingly disturbed by the way popular and political discourses essentialised people from the Middle East as irrational, criminal and violent, and through my networks, I was aware of the negative impact this was having on individuals and communities. The times called for a play about Arabic-speaking or Middle Eastern characters which challenged the notion that they were the enemy within, the reason Australian needed to live on high alert, and which critiqued the attendant moral panic. To this end, I decided to write a play for general or predominantly white audiences which examined the fear of the 'mad Arab' stereotype, but from the perspective of a young woman from an Arabic-speaking background.

WRITING *JUMP FOR JORDAN*

To undertake this project, I drew upon my practical experience as a playwright working in the alternative and small-to-medium sector. After my first play commission in 1987, I co-founded Powerhouse Youth Theatre (PYT) in Sydney's west. I wrote for and supported the company for the next fifteen years, while also working further afield in youth theatre, community theatre, community cultural development, and theatre for young people (TYP). As it was the heyday of Australia's official policy of multiculturalism, celebrating cultural pluralism was a personal conviction, a sector norm, and my professional bread and butter. The sector contracted after 1996, and playwrighting opportunities diminished, so I focused on developing a body of solo work informed by the ideals of the earlier multicultural and alternative theatre movements. These plays explored themes of cultural negotiation and clash, created space for a female subjectivity and people under-represented in society, and were informed by my MA studies (1996-1998) into feminist theatre practice.[1]

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[1] For example, *Fathom* (2005), *The Uninvited Voice* (2006), *The Rood Screen* (2006), *Spirit* (2007), *Olympia and Phoung* (2010) and *Aurora's Lament* (2010).

To write *Jump for Jordan*, I also drew upon my personal and social experience. My cultural background is not homogenous nor cohesive. I was born in Australia to an Australian mother of Irish decent, and a Maltese father whose family had migrated to Australia to escape Malta's post-war devastation and mass unemployment. My hybrid cultural background, oblique exposure to the Maltese language and culture, and my upbringing in working-class suburbs in western Sydney settled by numerous migrant groups, had predisposed me to themes concerned with diaspora and displacement, and no doubt explains the affinity I felt with my Palestinian-Jordanian-Australian friend and my instant imaginative engagement with her plight.

A FEMINIST PLAY

To obtain the tools for this dig, I turned to feminist theory and feminist theatre practice.

An earlier encounter with this field of enquiry had had a transformative impact upon my practice. In 1998, as a student in Dr Margaret Williams' revelatory *Women and Theatre* course at the University of New South Wales, I read plays by Gertrude Stein, Maria Irene Fornes, Louise Page, Franca Rama, Marguerite Duras, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, Pam Gems, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver and Hélène Cixous.[2] Among this body of female-authored work I found forms which effectively defied traditional dramatic writing pedagogy; which revelled in language, patterns, rhythms, textures, juxtaposition, contiguity and role play; which backgrounded plot and conflict, and flouted the space-time dynamics of realism; and which demonstrated that modes of representation were ideologically or value laden. My then struggle to write plays which could break free of the "exclusionary masculinist cultural imagination" (Fensham & Varney 2005, 36), predisposed me to the theories of the French feminist theorists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, and the "florid manifestos" (Dolan 1996, 94) of *écriture féminine* - feminine writing or writing the body. Studying the elusive but

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[2] For example, *Portrait of Dora* by Hélène Cixous, *A Rat's Mass* by Adrienne Kennedy, *Savannah Bay* by Marguerite Duras, *Tender Buttons* by Gertrude Stein, *Tissue* by Louise Page, *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When The Rainbow Is Not Enuf* by Ntozake Shange, *Fefu and Her Friends* by Maria Irene Fornes, *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* by Pam Gems.

evocative methodologies espoused by the French feminists, as well as the strategies employed by the aforementioned playwrights, equipped me with the tools to complete my MA with a research project in which I wrote *The Daphne Massacre*, a play which decisively opened up a new dramaturgical and methodological frontier in my practice, and signalled my enlistment in the feminist aesthetic insurgency against the patriarchal symbolic order which - being stratified, linear, vertical, exclusive and transcendent - is also not unlike a scientifically-conceived archaeological dig site.

The positive impact feminist theatre had had on my practice, and my understanding that feminisms, regardless of their framework or affiliation, challenged the ideological nature of representation (Diamond 1997, 85), unequivocally recommended feminism as the theoretical domain best suited to this research project.[3] In order to proceed, and ensure that I had the right tools for the present dig, I needed to distinguish feminist aesthetics from feminine aesthetics, and arrive at a working definition of feminist theatre practice.

In *Feminist Aesthetics* (1985), Gisela Ecker defines the difference between feminine and feminist aesthetics. She states that feminine aesthetics is founded on the belief that a woman is a coherent "ontological essence" who produces something defined as "women's art" (Ecker 1985, 15-16). If her art is writing, for example, she will probably produce a text which would tend to be inward, horizontally organised, fascinated with process, decentred and set in the continuous present (Ecker 1985, 17), and she would produce this due to her nature, and not her social or historical conditions. Ecker argues that assertions such as these which generalise the features found in women's art tend to lead to new categories of exclusion and idealisation of the feminine (Ecker 1985, 17). This was why the work of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, which placed female sexual difference at the centre of their aesthetic insurgency, was accused of moving towards essentialist positions (Ecker 1985, 18). This is particularly true of Cixous whose formulation of *écriture féminine* was widely criticised as biologically reductive (Ecker

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[3] Frameworks includes liberal, radical or materialist (Reinelt 2009, 29). Affiliations include semiotics, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, post-modernism and deconstruction (Aston 1995, 4-5).

1985, 18). Feminist aesthetics, on the other hand, is a cultural intervention, an "artificial construct" (Ecker 1985, 18) strategically employed to critique traditional assumptions (Ecker 1985, 21). While it demands reflection upon feminine aesthetics, it rejects certainties about women's art and women's nature, and is cognisant of history's relative necessities and conditions (Ecker 1985, 21). Since this practice-led research sought to resist the ideological containment of difference, and was therefore anti-essentialist, it had become clear that feminist, rather than feminine, aesthetics offered the better conceptual pathway for the development of my creative project.

The working definition of feminist theatre practice that underpins this research project complements this notion of feminist aesthetics. The definition was provided by Elaine Aston in her book *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook*. Borrowing a term from theatre director Simone Benmussa, Aston argues that feminist theatre practice operates formally and ideologically as a "sphere of disturbance" (Aston 1999, 18):

> It is not to be categorised as one type or style of theatre, as a 'theatre of the body', as 'visual theatre', as aural, physical or devised theatre, but as a practice that 'steals' or draws on whatever is necessary, from whatever is needed, to oppose categorisation; to disturb the processes that en-gender meaning and representation; to activate a sphere of doing for the purpose of 'undoing'. (Aston 1999, 18).

The concept of a "sphere of disturbance" was coined by the Tunisian-born French playwright and theatre director Simone Benmussa, and articulated in her introduction to *Benmussa Directs* (1979). In a type of coda, after discussing the stagework behind her production of Hélène Cixous' play *Portrait of Dora* (1979), Benmussa writes of the need to oppose and escape the system of "stagnant categories" (21), and to liberate poetic expression from cultural vivisection and mutilation (20) by creating a theatrical sphere of disturbance in which "sensory impressions are interwoven, superimposed, confused, and escape from their original meaning to the point of becoming indistinguishable from each other" (20-21). As I will discuss, the concept of a "field of

disturbance" proved to have an enduring influence over the dramaturgy of *Jump for Jordan.*

Aston's definition of feminist theatre practice aligned well with the aims of my creative project, and supplied me with three active verbs - to oppose, to disturb, and to activate - which would serve as invaluable tools for this creative dig. This exegesis therefore works within the purview of Aston's definition. It draws upon feminist texts from France, Britain, Germany, Australia and the United States which span forty years or more, and which were written by authors across the spectrum of feminisms. While my ongoing efforts to leverage my creative voice draw me back to the writings of Cixous, this research project is primarily concerned with "the production of cultural meanings" (Dolan 1996, 94), and the inclusion of multiple differences in its critique of inequality (Gillis and Munford 2006, 167). As such, it resides at the materialist end of the spectrum of third-wave feminism.

CHALLENGES

This practice-led research project came with a particular set of challenges.

First of all, I was not from an Arabic-speaking background. I was the child of a migrant, who had a hybrid cultural heritage and an abiding passion for diasporic themes. I had built a practice based on telling other people's stories and writing outside of my cultural milieu, had a proven commitment to the representation of diversity, and an affinity with my friend's equivocal experience as a second-generation Australian. I would conduct extensive cultural and historical research, consult with Arabic-speaking advisors, and write a work of obvious fiction. However, since I was writing about a culture other than my own, without the endorsement implied by community collaboration, and without the guise of authenticity offered by verisimilitude or documentary theatre, I was aware that I might be criticised for cultural appropriation or distortion, and that the judgement of the play could be clouded by these and other anxieties. I would therefore need to examine the assumptions that had underpinned my practice to date, and be clear about the ethical basis on which to proceed with this project.

Secondly, unlike much of my early work, I was not primarily writing *Jump for Jordan* for the community from whom I had gleaned the story. It was writing for a general or mainstream audience, and for performance on an Australian main stage. While I had seen many mainstream productions, I had written very little for this sector, and needed to acquaint myself with its industrial and commercial realities and audience expectations. At the outset, I was aware that the sector was comprised of Large Mainstream "subsidised state theatre companies or occasionally their commercial equivalents" (Chesterman 1995, 8) which staged prestigious big-budget productions in large theatres, and medium and regional theatre companies which received less subsidy and constituted the Small Mainstream (Chesterman 1995, 8). In terms of program, it was generally agreed that mainstream theatre programming ranged between "largely conventional" to occasionally innovative (Chesterman 1995, 8). However, as this study will show, I was to learn much about this sector's "reprehensible inurement to whiteness" (Lewis 2007, 2) and institutionalisation of the aesthetic of "Anglo-realism" (Fotheringham 1998, 36), which did not augur well for the production prospects of my particular creative work in this sector. Additionally, in their book *The Doll's Revolution: Australian theatre and cultural imagination*, Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney argue that the audience for mainstream theatre is "already constituted by the existing terms of public discourse - such as the values, opinions and modes of representation circulating within the mass media as well as by other markers of taste or commercial value" (47). This suggested that, should *Jump for Jordan* actually make it onto a mainstream stage, the form and content and provocation of the play might be coolly or even antagonistically received by an audience who expects their "tribal safety" (Archer 2005, 2-5) to remain undisrupted.

CONTRIBUTION

Nevertheless, my hope was that my creative project *Jump for Jordan* would receive a production on a main stage and thereby contribute a formally innovative and culturally diverse play to the contemporary Australian repertoire. I also hoped that this practice-led research would contribute to the debate about the representation of cultural diversity

on Australian stages, and to a wider appreciation of alternative dramaturgies in text-based theatre.

EVALUATION

In this section of the exegesis, I conduct an evaluation of the research site. I survey the site surrounding the artefact *Jump for Jordan* in order to determine the questions and strategies which will best serve its discovery.[4] I conduct this evaluation by investigating two research sub-questions:

> Can a writer write outside of their cultural or ethnic context?
> What kind of plays make it onto the Australian main stage?

WRITING OUTSIDE OF ONE'S CULTURAL OR ETHNIC CONTEXT

Despite my artistic practice and credentials, and personal experience and sensibilities, I was not from an Arabic-speaking background. I was developing a cross-cultural play, from conjoined Palestinian, Jordanian and Australian narratives, but was writing outside of my specific cultural and ethnic background. I had often told stories which had been obtained from other individuals and communities, with their express approval, but in this instance, I was developing a play not from community testimonies, but from an idea granted to me by a friend which would be fictionalised and placed before a mainstream audience. Given this shift from collaborative to solo practice, from community development to mainstream audience development, my practice of telling stories about cultural groups other than my own required examination.

THE RETREAT RESPONSE

The strongest prompt to examine this aspect of my practice occurred while I was working as a dramaturge on *The Violence Project* for Powerhouse Youth Theatre. During auditions, a comment from a colleague, Peter Polites, led me to write the following comment in my project journal:

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[4] I am here using a sequential organising principle, even though, as mentioned, my creative process is not sequential, and examination and re-examination of pertinent issues occurred during every creative development stage, from first draft through to rehearsal and production.

> One of the Sweatshop guys said that writing about another culture is minstrelling, appropriation and down right wrong (3 September 2013, Abela 2010-2014).

I was taken aback by the stridency of his claim that equated telling another's story with white entertainers performing in black face. As this accusation could be levelled at me, it necessitated investigation.

Peter Polites is a member of Sweatshop, a critical literacy movement based in Bankstown in Western Sydney which "fosters spaces where the Other can write, perform and publish their own stories" (Polites in Polites and Convery 2013). In 'Speaking for the Other', an article in which Polites and Stephanie Convery present a dialogue about the issue of writing another's story, he argues that a writer who writes another's story is serving himself and the system which affords him privilege:

> In writing another's story, the writer enriches their own life under the banner of advocacy, while reinforcing their own privilege. The people about whom they are writing are often from different cultural and social backgrounds, and don't have the resources to tell their own stories. Being a writer needs to be acknowledged as a form of privilege. Despite the claims of many, writing is no accidental discipline: it requires access to resources, the learned (not intuitive) command of language, and an understanding of the social and cultural codes of communication. Thus, when a writer tells someone else's story, they do it through the systemic and structural methods from which they have benefited and the Other has not. (Polites in Polites and Convery 2013)

Polites characterises the writer of another's story as male, privileged, progressive and "Anglo/white", and describes them as a "white multiculturalist" (Polites in Polites and Convery 2013). He characterises the Other as a subordinate group typified by Sweatshop members - "queers, Muslims, people with disability, feminists, single white fathers (think the kind *A Current Affair* love), people from commission housing,

Indigenous Australians, people in exile and so on" (Polites in Polites and Convery 2013). According to Polites, the twain should never meet: the Other should not work with "people from other communities"; and the writer should positively disengage and leave an "autonomous and self-determining space for the Other" (Polites in Polites and Convery 2013).

As a former resident and long-time arts worker in Western Sydney, I understood the need for Western Sydney artists to disrupt the dominant discourses which disparage this region, and seize opportunities to represent their own lives and communities.[5] I was also cognisant of the hegemonic hold on history and national narratives, and the need for these to be told anew, particularly by the colonised and dispossessed. However, as a blanket writing orthodoxy, it was easy to agree with Stephanie Convery, Polites' respondent in *Speaking for the Other*, that a retreat response was a problematic and counter-productive proposition (Convery in Polites and Convery 2013).

First, as Convery states, distancing "neither counteracts pre-existing negative discourses nor provides a counterweight to reactionary politics" (Convery in Polites and Convery 2013). On the contrary, it abandons the Other to their unallied structural disadvantage, and allows the privileged writer to keep "writing the Other out" (Convery in Polites and Convery 2013). Second, it fights the dominant culture's containment of difference by urging privileged and marginalised people alike to contain themselves within mutually exclusive spaces (Polites in Polites and Convery 2013). If, as Convery suggests, this legitimises the telling only of one's own narrative, then this severely restricts writers to their literal milieu, and renders the representation of composite narratives and multicultural communities impossible (Convery in Polites and Convery 2013). Third, the obligation to restrict the content of one's creative output to one's literal milieu implicitly imposes a duty to predominantly represent credentialled and authentic narratives. If, as Convery speculates, this leads to a legitimisation only of realist genres, such as memoir and documentary, then the impoverishment of literature and theatre is at

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[5] Powerhouse Youth Theatre's latest projects are very much in this vein. For example, *The Violence Project* (2013), *In This Fair Field* (2013-14), *Little BagDad* (2014-15), and *Jump First, Ask Later* (2015).

hand. From this perspective, African-American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks' use of parody of nineteenth-century minstrel shows in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (Rayner and Elam 1994), for example, would be viewed as heretical.

Polities is correct in saying that "there is no such thing as the neutrality of imagination. Imagination is framed by what we know and the structures of power that govern us" (Polites in Polites and Convery, 2013). However, is imagination not the most immediate escape route for a subordinated person? Is it not a means by which we may dismantle the frameworks that have governed our thinking? Is it not a way of engaging with the Other and discovering that they are, in fact, knowable? If so, then this faculty, and the new affective relationships it can forge, would be vital to feminist theatre practice.

CREDIBILITY NOT AUTHENTICITY

While I was not persuaded by Polites' equation of empowerment with isolation, I understood that artists who created artworks from this position could lay claim to authenticity. I was also aware that contemporary audiences had become accustomed to "the pervasive glorification of experience, and the testimonial strategies used to enforce it as truth" (Dolan 1996, 103), and that I would have to contend with the expectation that *Jump for Jordan* was an authentic portrayal of an Arab-Australian family.[6] However, Rand Hazou's paper "Hypermediacy and credibility in documentary theatre: the craft of make-believe in Théâtre du Soleil's Le Dernier Caravanserail" (Hazou 2010), delivered at the 2010 ADSA conference, denounces the obsession with authenticity in theatre. Drawing on media theory, he explores the term 'credibility' and applies it to his discussion of Theatre de Soleil's production of *Le Dernier Caravanserail* which I had seen at the Melbourne International Festival in 2005. Hazou argued that Theatre de Soleil's anti-realist account of the global plight of refugees was

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[6] For example, the rise of verbatim theatre, documentary theatre, confessional Talk Shows, Reality TV, and testimonial storytelling events such as those broadcast by *The Moth* and *This American Life*, have contributed to a contemporary storytelling culture which valorises "true" stories.

not authentic, could never be authentic, because their craft, and the very craft of theatre, is one of "make believe" - even when dealing with actual testimonies of the Other. Instead, the production was credible in the sense that it was believable and trustworthy. I needed no convincing that theatre is the craft of 'make believe', and that our task is to present work which is trustworthy rather than true. In the first year of my candidature, I too began to aim for credibility, not authenticity, as I wrote *Jump for Jordan*, and found this concept to be a grounding and sustaining one as I navigated the politics and assumptions around the representation of cultural diversity on stage. Making this conceptual shift, a move in which hearing Hazou's paper was instrumental, I was better equipped to manage comments in interviews or Q & A sessions that assumed that *Jump for Jordan* was an authentic portrayal or true story, rather than credible work of art.

NARRATIVE OWNERSHIP

In Polites' view, stories are owned only by the subject of that story, or by the community to whom that subject belongs. Which prompts the question, who owns the story at the heart of *Jump for Jordan*? My friend certainly had had an experience which sparked the play's narrative, but, claiming no ownership, she had gifted it to me almost without condition.[7] While I was not from her Arabic-speaking community, I was from her Australian community, was a fellow second-generation Australian, and was also from her friendship network, so it could be argued that I had some right to reuse and transform the story. However, imaginatively, it had taken hold of me. Key elements and metaphorical dimensions had begun to fuse with my own family history, thinking on current events, and distinct theatrical preferences. As I worked on the play, fact gave way to fiction and fantasy, evolved into tropes and archetypes and stock comic mechanisms, which suggests that, at some point, a writer's output belongs not exclusively to her, but to her literary heritage or cultural patterning. And does not the following comment from a *Jump for Jordan* reviewer Miriam Succar, as well as the regular exclamation of *that's my story!* from members of the play's culturally diverse audience, suggest that, at the end of the day, ownership of a story transcends the

[7] Her only condition was that I change real names.

originator and comes to reside within an Imaginary that is simultaneously private and collective?

> Have you ever felt that you are personal friends with characters in a movie or play that you are completely immersed in? That's the effect that Donna Abela's play, Jump for Jordan, had on me. (Succar 2014)

PRIVILEGE

A similar ambivalence emerges as I consider the the allied issue of privilege. I am indeed privileged in the sense that Polites suggests, in that I have a learned command of language, an understanding of the codes of communication, and the resources with which to tell this story. I also "pass" as white in my society and live without racial persecution. However, as defined by Polites, I meet the definition of Other or subordinate - queer and feminist - rather than the definition of privileged - male and Anglo/white. As mentioned, I pass as white, but I do not always pass as "Anglo" - not within the arts community which, for statistical purposes, classifies artists according to their parents' first language; and not among European friends who readily embrace me as a fellow "wog". Once again, I am faced with complexities, not simple essentialisms. I realise that the narrative of *Jump for Jordan* is actually hybrid, like its author, and as such, can not achieve its fullest expression in a monologic vacuum. It fundamentally requires dialogue and negotiation. Ethically, then, I felt confident to proceed with this creative project, with the proviso that, as Convery advises, I did so with an awareness of my status as a privileged writer (Convery in Polites and Convery 2013) telling a story about people that my society pushes to the margin.

IMAGINATIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE OTHER

Before I apply my feminist tools to this topic, I refract the methodology of retreat through the prism of Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert's description of "ghetto theatre". In their book "Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis" (2002) they argue that ghetto theatre tends to be monocultural, monologic, muting of cross-cultural

negotiations, and ultimately politically effective (Lo and Gilbert 2002, 32) - which, I would suggest, fairly accurately denotes the type of theatre one would make using a retreat response. With ghetto theatre's nostalgic focus on the homeland (Lo and Gilbert 2002, 32), not the new land, and with the retreat response's likely disavowal of non-realist forms, one can see that this social withdrawal is also likely to be accompanied by a retreat from aesthetic ambition. As I do not wish to write a play which typifies ghetto theatre, it is clear that the retreat response offers strategies which are antithetical to the aims of my creative project.

This course of inquiry confirmed my belief that a writer can write outside of their cultural or ethnic context. Moreover, it provided conceptual, methodological and dramaturgical indicators which could inform my practice as I developed my creative project *Jump for Jordan*. Foremost among these was a conviction and impetus described by Convery as an "imaginative engagement with the Other" which, as she states, enables fiction to do the crucial work of rendering the Other knowable (Convery in Polites and Convery 2013). As I did not wish to fight xenophobia with xenophobia, nor base my practice on a cornerstone of withdrawal or fear, this conviction and impetus would assist me in my need to oppose monologic and monocultural tendencies, and to disturb or undo these should they surface in my play. Strategically, I needed to put into practice the attitude that a courageous advance would be more effective than retreat, and activate a sphere of doing in which the Other is not perceived as an enemy or existential threat, but as someone or something not-yet-known. I also had to manage the attendant risk. To imaginatively engage with the not-yet-known Other is to risk being changed by the exchange, is to create the possibility of actually becoming other oneself.

THE CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN THEATRE LANDSCAPE

To further evaluate the research site surrounding the artefact *Jump for Jordan*, a second research sub-question was investigated:

> What kind of plays make it onto the Australian main stage?

In this section, I survey key debates and practices within the contemporary Australian theatre landscape, particularly as they pertain to text-based theatre, or the production of playscripts. While I have attempted to cast my research net nationally, I accept director and academic Julian Meyrick's observation that it is difficult to talk about Australian theatre because of its geographically dispersed nature (Meyrick 2005, 8), and acknowledge that the following overview is likely to reflect my Sydney-centric practice and experience. The survey focuses on the period between the 1980s and the present, and investigates four key areas: plays that reflect our evolving society, adaptations, female-authored plays, and lesbian-themed plays. I then address the question, how can I effectively place culturally diverse characters on a contemporary Australian main stage? In other words, what dramaturgical strategies would allow me to write a play that would resist the ideological containment of difference or otherness, and appeal to its intended audience.

PLAYS THAT REFLECT OUR EVOLVING SOCIETY [8]

In the 1980s and 1990s, as I was cutting my teeth as a young playwright, a proliferation of alternative theatre companies emerged which meaningfully and enthusiastically engaged with the ethnic, class and gender experiences of communities within Australian society. They followed on the heels of the 1960s and 1970s New Wave movement which had placed vernacular accents and perspectives onto Australian stages, albeit in

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[8] During a 2013 talk hosted by the Australian Writers' Guild, Australian playwright Lachlan Philpot noted that theatre makers in the USA use the term "plays that reflect our evolving society" instead of other terms such as "culturally diverse plays". Since the first term acknowledges social reality rather than difference and marginality, social inclusion rather than exception, I have chosen to use it in this thesis.

plays predominantly authored by white, middle-class men. They shared the New Theatre movement's alignment with the Left, and commitment to socially-engaged theatre (New Theatre 1992, 13) which, between 1932 and the 1950s, had incubated many Australian plays, particularly by women who used "radical theatrical modes" (Thomson 1998, 105) to critique establishment and patriarchal ideologies.

This alternative theatre movement was socially-engaged, inclusive of cultural diversity, and keen to create plays which reflected Australia's evolving society. It was also energised by the era's social upheavals, such as the women's movement, the land rights and reconciliation movements,[9] the post Bicentennial republican push, the gay and lesbian civil rights campaigns, and multiculturalism. However, progressive top down policy making and funding allocation were instrumental in creating the circumstances which enabled this movement to gain widespread cultural traction. For example, the Whitlam Government's dismantling of the White Australia immigration policy in 1973, and adoption of a policy of Multiculturalism (which successive federal governments maintained until 1996), enabled the Australia Council for the Arts to support multicultural arts financially (Mead 2008, 32) and community-based arts practice. State and local governments also supported these arts practices by employing Community Arts Officers and Multicultural Arts Officers, and staging or supporting festivals which celebrated diverse communities and cultural expression. In Sydney, two festivals were particularly galvanising: the NSW Carnivale Multicultural Arts Festival which was held annually between 1976 and 2004; and the Multicultural Theatre Festival (1991-1993), an initiative of the Multicultural Theatre Alliance which brought together companies that performed in accents and contexts which included Greek, Turkish, Kurdish, Cantonese, Mandarin and Latin-American Spanish (Chidiac 2012).

As a playwright who began working professionally in 1987, I directly experienced the extent of this era's organisational and structural support for socially-inclusive theatre practice and playwrighting, and understood that the work being made in our sector was in step with evolving community standards. For example, funding and drive existed to

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[9] The official movement toward national reconciliation commenced in 1991 with the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

establish the International Festival of Young Playwrights (1985), the first Aboriginal Playwrights' Conference (1986/7), Powerhouse Youth Theatre (1987), Playworks Women Performance Writers Network (1988), the Women's Circus (1991), and Belvoir Street Theatre Company's annual Asian Theatre Festival (1993). Added to this list is the creation of state-based indigenous theatre companies, and the transition of the 1978 Sydney Mardi Gras protest march into an annual parade and arts festival celebrating sexual diversity.

On the ground, numerous alternative theatre companies operated under the broad banner of multicultural theatre. That is, they created cross-cultural theatre which entailed a "process of encounter and negotiation between different cultural sensibilities" (Lo and Gilbert 2002, 31), and which ranged from folkloric display (33-34) and cultural maintenance, through to counter-discursive practices which aimed to "promote cultural diversity" and "participate in the symbolic space of the national narrative" (34). Examples of the latter include Death Defying Theatre, Thalia Theatre, Doppio Teatro, Sidetrack Theatre, Taqa Theatre, Auto de Fe, the Filiki Players, Powerhouse Youth Theatre and Citymoon Theatre. Companies such as these routinely assembled culturally diverse creative teams, produced work which "privileged diverse and difficult new voices" (Mead 2008, 10) and was created with or for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.[10]

Many of the aforementioned companies often group-devised their productions, and thereby questioned the centrality of the playtext (Mead 2008, 10). They were emblematic of a generation's commitment to social inclusion which saw the emergence of playwrights whose heritage did not stem from the Anglo-Celtic axis: for example, Noëlle Janaczewska, Tes Lyssiotis, Janis Balodis, Teresa Crea, Binh Duy Ta, Merlinda Bobis, Jack Davis, Adam Grossetti, Antonietta Morgillo, Kevin Gilbert, and Duong Le Quy. While hybrid and bi-lingual work remained largely confined to the multiculturalist performance "ghetto" (Kelly 1998, 15), text-based plays with intercultural narratives did begin to receive productions on small and large main stages: *The Floating World*

[10] CALD is an acronym for culturally and linguistically diverse people; in the 1980s and 1990s the acronym NESB (non-English speaking background) was commonly used.

(1979) by John Romeril, *Shimada* (1987) by Jill Shearer, *The History of Water* (1992) by Noelle Janaczewska, Anna Brionowski's *The Gap* (1993), *Fortune* (1993) by Hilary Bell, *Clark In Sarajevo* (1998) by Catherine Zimdahl, and *Svetlana in Slingbacks* (1999) by Valentina Levkowicz. Five of these plays centrally represent Japanese, Vietnamese or Chinese characters, and indicate that an appreciation that Australia was part of Asia had made Asia a "fashionable" topic in Australian theatre (Lo 1998, 53-54).

By the 1990s, the alternative theatre movement was becoming an influential force, and beginning to have an impact beyond its constituency. As Veronica Kelly writes in *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s* (1998), three decades of subsidised government funding had relocated "repertoire innovation and stylistic renewal" to the community and regional theatre sectors (Kelly 1998, 6). Kelly also notes that postmodern and physical theatre, and intercultural hybrid performance modes, were challenging, and emerging as an alternative to, "the realist monolith of European-influenced mainstage style" (Kelly 1998, 10-12). Likewise, in *What is an Australian Play? Have we Failed our Ethnic Writers?* (2008), Chris Mead wrote that the alternative theatre companies of this era had "renegotiated an audience's relationship to the theatrical repertoire and to naturalism, while celebrating bold, inclusive, innovative theatre-making" (Mead 2008, 10). Crucially, as Richard Fotheringham observed in *Boundary Riders and Claim Jumpers: The Australian Theatre Industry* (1998), this sector had produced agents who were "starting to reshape the field" (Fotheringham 1998, 36) breaking down the NIDA and state theatre company hegemony.[11]

As a new millennium approached, generational change in Australian theatre looked certain (Meyrick 2005, 7). Our national and creative engagement with "the irrepressible other" (Parr 1998, 89) had seen Australian theatre look forward to "utopian possibilities" (Kelly 1998, 1); with good reason, many commentators believed that a

[11] Fotheringham argues that the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), which until 1978 was the only training institution, and the state theatre companies, together institutionalised Anglo-realism and shored it up as a way of privileging NIDA graduates, and excluding "directors and actors who came from other backgrounds and training experiences" (Fotheringham 1998, 27-28). However, I note that between 2014 and 2016, Kristine Landon-Smith, former Artistic Director of Tamasha Theatre in the UK, was employed as a Lecturer in Acting at NIDA to apply her intracultural practice and to ensure diversity across the student body.

'multicultural boom' was imminent (Mead 2008, 9). Intercultural narratives, hybrid performance styles, and possibly even different theatre-making models, looked set to impact the repertoire of mainstream theatre companies because, as Kelly writes:

> women's, gay and lesbian, community, Aboriginal and multicultural theatre […] has moved from the theatrical margin to credibly inhabit, if not dominate, a centre undergoing various challenges to its centrality, and to affect some of its performance and dramaturgical practices. (Kelly 1998, 4)

However, in 1996, the dominant culture responded by reasserting its centrality with a severity that was to blindside the theatre community, and curb its cross-cultural and polyvocal promise for a generation. As cleaners swept up the tinsel from that year's Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade, I learned that a coalition of Liberal and National party politicians had claimed victory in that year's federal election. The "reactionary" (Fotheringham 1998, 21) government they formed quickly cancelled the national policy of multiculturalism, and wound back socially inclusive policies which previous governments, Liberal and Labor, had successively built upon. Government and likeminded boundary riders[12] reasserted an official culture based upon a white-Anglo settler narrative.[13] After forty years of arts policies which had prioritised the creation of Australian cultural product over profit, changes were made which demanded that professional theatre focus on making money (Fotheringham 1998, 35). Given its less advantaged audiences, this shift effectively put much of the alternative theatre sector on notice.

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[12] Fotheringham uses the term "boundary riders" to describe those who resist the reshaping or redefinition of their sphere of influence (1998, 33).

[13] For example, historian Geoffrey Blainey had argued against migration policies that were allegedly causing the "Asianisation" of Australia, and in 1993, coined the term "black-arm band" view of history" to refer to the work of Australian historians who were overly critical of the European settlement of Australia; Prime Minister John Howard's address to the 1997 Reconciliation Convention described the dispossession of Aboriginal people as a mere historical "blemish"; the Howard government refused to implement a key recommendation of the Keating Government's *Bringing Them Home* report (1999) into the stolen generations and issue a formal and widely anticipated apology; Keith Windschuttle published *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, vol 1* in 2002 which argued that much Australian Aboriginal history had been fabricated or based on questionable evidence.

For Australian theatre, the most significant and far-reaching policy shift was the introduction of a system which divided the performing arts into two inequitably funded tiers. Major performing arts companies, such as state theatre companies, did receive funding cuts, but their funding base was quarantined within the Major Organisations Board of the Australian Council (Meyrick 2014, 49-50). With secure but reduced funding, mainstage theatre companies increased their dependence on box office and sponsorship income, made programming decisions which favoured safe formulas and styles (Kelly 1998, 2), and fostered a risk-averse mentality. Following Fotheringham's line of thought, the NIDA and state theatre company hegemony, the aesthetic preference for Anglo-realism, and establishment favour for heritage or traditional artforms, would therefore have been reinforced.

By contrast, funding to theatre companies in the second tier - now known as the small-to-medium sector - was not quarantined from cuts. Companies had to compete within a diminished funding pool, and the number of jobs and opportunities in this sector shrank (Meyrick 2005, 11-16). Just as drastically, theatre companies which had been "engine rooms of repertoire reform" (Meyrick 2014, 49-50) ceased to exist. Within a decade, as universities were turning out more theatre and writing graduates than ever before, fewer shows were being produced by fewer companies, and fewer Australian plays were making it into production (Meyrick 2005, 11-16). To a practitioner like myself who had worked in this sector since 1987, Julian Meyrick's assessment of the impact of the first decade of top down structural reform seems accurate:

> The truth is that the last decade has been a time of slow rot for the industry. Where good work has flourished, it has done so despite rather than because of broader social conditions. The lack of time, money, respect and care that are now constant features of staging theatre in this country debases the collective soul of the industry and grinds down the individual artist… Vested interest, lack of thought and, above all, fear cap an honest and open debate about the debility of Australian theatre. (Meyrick 2005, 11-12)

The political shift and economic contraction of the 1990s turned the would-be multicultural boom into a bust, and rendered the concept of multiculturalism problematic and passé. In 2008, Chris Mead wrote that:

> critics increasingly regarded the concept of multiculturalism as an homogenising fiction that tended to emphasize exoticism, freeze fluidity and lock debates about Australian theatre into useless dichotomies, meaningless series of reductive groupings of us and them that synthesized differences within and between cultures into a falsely harmonious diversity. (Mead 2008, 12)

Rather than evolve the notion of multiculturalism beyond its earnest origins, and foster debate about the challenges of intercultural co-existence,[14] the nation, including the theatre community, distanced themselves from multiculturalism altogether. Companies which had been at the forefront of the field, such as Sidetrack Theatre and Death-Defying Theatre in Sydney, and Doppio Teatro in Adelaide, "tended to re-invent themselves in the 1990s in the direction of post-modernism - (or) else they died" (Mead 2008, 12); structures which could have made good on their achievements ceased to exist (Mead 2008, 12).

Unsurprisingly, the number of ethnically diverse playwrights declined (Mead 2008, 12). Added to this, events such as the 1992 native title land rights victory, and the 1995-96 Helen Demidenko literary hoax, problematised the cultural authenticity of people not from English-speaking backgrounds, and subjected culturally diverse artists to a burden of proof that Anglo-white artists did not likewise have to bear. In 1996, Jacqueline Lo stated:

> I think increasingly we'll be asked to prove our ethnic/cultural authenticity now that the first bloom of romance with official multiculturalism has faded and its

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[14] Playwright Noëlle Janaczewska offers an astute comment on this point: "In his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah advocates cosmopolitanism rather than multiculturalism. Multiculturalism, he argues, actively encouraged certain groups to hold on to traditional and 'authentic' values and practices (thereby denying them the possibility of change), whilst according other groups the space to change and evolve in response to new circumstances," (Janaczewska 2014).

> difficulties are foregrounded. A pessimistic prognosis - multiculturalism will veer away from an exploration of the hybrid space of say, Chinese-Australian-ness or Arab-Australian-ness and focus instead on defining and reifying difference, promoting monoculturalisms. (Lo 1999, 97)

In light of this, Tim Roseman's 2013 announcement that the plays produced on our main stages are overwhelmingly written by "white" playwrights and performed by "white" actors (Roseman 2013) was an inevitability. However, in the article in which Roseman discusses this indictment, he also describes me as a potential "beacon" for the Arabic community. Roseman's assumption that the writer of a play about Arabs must herself be Arabic was troubling. Did it speak of a broader expectation that Australian playwrights would or should define or reify (Lo in Playworks 1996, 97) their distinct difference, rather than venture into hybrid or contested space? Did it suggest that agents within Australian theatre were still most at home with "promoting monoculturalisms" (Lo in Playworks 1996, 97), were still concerned as much to exclude as well as include (Fotheringham 1998, 26)? Did it partly explain why white playwrights, unlike their pre-millennial peers, had stepped back from engaging with the other in their work?

The deep and divisive changes in the Australian theatre landscape directly affected Australian playwrights and their career and production prospects. For example, Julian Meyrick observed that, due to a programming preference for established writers (Meyrick 2014, 17) who were reliable box office bets, many playwrights who had been headed for success were not converted into "regular repertoire names" (Meyrick 2014, 35). As production slots and budgets for Australian plays diminished, so too did the cast size and theatrical scale of those plays that were written. Even established playwrights such as Louis Nowra and Stephen Sewell, who had previously written ground-breaking large cast plays, began to write plays on a smaller scale. This prompted reviewer and academic John McCallum to lament that "from a theatregoer's point of view something was lost when the theatre could no longer keep up with the vision of its best writers" (McCallum 2009, 238).

Today, Australian playwrights are often criticised for writing plays which lack risk and ambition, Perković's article (2014) being a recent example. However, in my view, playwrights have had little option but to maximise their production prospects by developing a low-budget aesthetic which makes a virtue out of restraint. Unfortunately, this pragmatism seems to have overridden the legacy of their playwriting predecessors, and stopped "a newly emerging dramatic sensibility", and the overthrow of our "Anglo-obsessed legacy", in their tracks (Meyrick 2005, 7-8).

AUSTRALIAN PLAYS REDEFINED

The evaluation of this research site thus far indicates that the type of Australian play most likely to be produced on a contemporary main stage in the twenty-first century is monocultural, Anglo-realist, modest in cast size and theatrical scope, and authored by a white male playwright. However, in the early 2000s, a curious redefinition of Australian plays to include the adaptation of classic texts created a second category of Australian play which found widespread favour with mainstream theatre companies.

For over two decades, Playbox Theatre Company in Melbourne exclusively produced Australian plays. However, in 2004, Michael Kantor, the newly appointed Artistic Director, renamed the company The Malthouse, and initiated a trend of producing theatre which "redefined the idea of a 'new Australian work' to include Australian revisionings of classic texts" (McCallum 2009, 329). This redefinition was endorsed by the Australia Council who accepted that an adaptation qualified as a new Australian play if the producing company decided to claim the work as such (Neill 28 May 2013). This ushered in a significant change in theatrical practice whereby a new category of auteur or director-driven adaptations not only entered the repertoire of mainstream theatre companies, but received disproportionate support and resources due to the quarantined funding base of companies within the Australian Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG)[15], and their subscription, or pre-sold, seasons.

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[15] The AMPAG is the representative body of Australia's 28 major performing arts companies, and includes the Malthouse, Belvior Street, the Melbourne Theatre Company, the Sydney Theatre Company, the State Theatre Company of South Australia, and Black Swan.

The issue came to a head in May 2013 when journalist Rosemary Neill published two articles highlighting the dominance of adaptations in the 2013 programs of the country's major theatre companies - up to five per company - and expressed little surprise that award-winning new plays were not entering, or remaining in, the main stage repertoire (Neill 28 May 2013). The ensuing ferment indicated that many in the field felt that Australian playwrights were being crowded out by this auteur approach (Elaine 2013) or "adaptive mentality" (Meyrick 2014, 36), and that original Australian plays, "especially works of scale", were being "sidelined, or indeed not commissioned at all" (Neill 28 May 2013). However, Ralph Myers,[16] Artistic Director of Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre, entered the fray. Responding to Neill's articles, Myers and director Simon Stone reframed the debate as a "generational conflict" where conservative baby boomers, and copyright law, were hampering the innovation and vision of a new generation of theatre makers (Myers 30 May 2013). The sense of appropriative entitlement, and the implied ageism, angered many playwrights and their supporters. The Australian Writers' Guild was quick to respond on their behalf:

> To claim primary authorship of a premise, an inspiration, a story, of characters, observations and insights, that somebody else has created, and that you acknowledge having stolen and corrupted, is such patent nonsense. It is an *enfant terrible* shouting, "Mine!" […] Gifted interpretation and direction can be incredibly inspiring, creative and rewarding, but it is not a superior primary act of creation that nullifies the creation, the talent and the art on which it is based (Elaine 2013).

The debate wore on. David Berthold, Artistic Director of La Boite Theatre Company in Brisbane wondered whether some theatres had "lost the intellectual and cultural capacity to best nurture plays and playwrights into full dramatic life" (Berthold 2013). John Bell, Artistic Director of the Bell Shakespeare Theatre Company, had his eye on

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[16] Ralph Myers was Artistic Director of Sydney's Belvior Street Theatre from 2011 to 2015. He increasingly programmed adaptations of classics: in his 2014 season, in one form or another, they accounted for nine out of thirteen productions.

the Australian canon when he reminded his peers that "if there are no new plays, there will be no future classics" (Bell 2014). In 2014, Julian Meyrick responded by publishing *The Retreat of our National Drama* in which he suggested that a door was closing for Australian playwrights, living and dead (Meyrick 2014, 34-35); he called for the establishment of a national theatre which would strengthen the commitment to Australian drama. Playwright Andrew Bovell added despondency to the already considerable list of obstacles to writing a new play when he said that:

> Nothing will stifle the creativity of Australian playwrights more than the belief that our best is not good enough, while the rewriting of European plays comes to pass as an Australian theatre. (Bovell 2012, 67)

Looked at historically, the preference of the dominant culture for privileging Australian *takes* on foreign stories, over and above original Australian *stories*, may also point to a tendency to devalue Australian plays per se. Unlike their European precursors, Australian plays were never the centrepiece of ancient religious festivals, and did not evolve over thousands of years in tandem with a nation's sense of identity. They first emerged from the pens of post-Federation enthusiasts, and have been dogged by the perception that they are uncommercial and of little interest to audiences (McCallum 2009, 14; Mead 2007, 13); not theatrically adventurous (Barrie Kosky quoted in Cochrane 1996); not strong on structure and craft (Perković 2014); or are just plain bad (Simon Stone quoted in Neill 2013, and in Perković 2014). Views such as these have been circulating since the beginning of the twentieth century (McCallum 2009, 12), and have worked to displace original Australian stories from our stages.[17]

A second historical tendency goes beyond Rosemary Neill's suggestion that the rash of adaptations may be a "sign of the bankruptcy of original ideas" (Neill 25-26 May 2013),

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[17] For example, neither the commercial success of *On Our Selection* (1912), an agreement to produce Katharine Susannah Prichard's award winning *Brumby Innes* (1923) (McCallum 2009, 44), advocacy that Australian plays could save them from the advent of cinema (McCallum 2009, 42), nor the jubilant reception that greeted the Union Repertoire Theatre's production of Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955) (Meyrick 2014, 46), could persuade the commercial theatre agency J. C. Williamsons to invest in locally-written work (McCallum 2009, 18).

and points to what Meyrick describes as “habit of deference, even a servility of soul” that once characterised audiences who wanted to feel worthy of “the Empire’s finest” (Meyrick 2014, 41). This “habit” or “servility”, which A. A. Phillips called “the cultural cringe” (Phillips 1950), continues to be evident in contemporary theatre programming (Meyrick 2014, 44). If this is the case, the recent adaptation debate perhaps hints at a colonial residue which has institutionalised cultural inferiority and infused our playwrighting and play producing community with what dramaturge Jana Perković describes as “a culturally specific fear of self-expression” (Perković 2014, section 6). Seen in this light, Simon Stone’s adaptations are not innovations which reinvent the classics, but insecure and retrograde attempts to look to the northern hemisphere for our fables and cultural norms, and thereby to forgo or dilute our own cultural sovereignty. If we can only be confident writers and producers of plays when we breathe life into imported stories, then we must admit that this is a resolutely anti-Antipodean stance, a failure to hear or represent or identify with the voices in the global south in which Australia is firmly placed. It is quite possibly evidence of the “branch town mentality” that our country has historically feared (Meyrick 2014, 20), but has apparently not been able to overcome.

Alternatively, and much more disturbingly, perhaps what we are witnessing is institutional racism which is in step with a prevailing political myth that Australia is, in the words of Andrew Bovell, “white, Anglo-Celtic and Christian” (Bovell 2014). Whether or not this is the case, Bovell nevertheless doubts that the long dead Russian playwright Chekhov - Simon Stone’s favourite writer (Stone 2013) - can adequately address the urgencies within contemporary Australian society:

> At this moment in our history I find myself hungry for content…. For plays that are saying something. I want meat on the bone. I want to think. I want to be upset. I want to be shocked and shaken. I sense a rise of conservatism in this country. A narrowing of opportunity. A widening of the gap between rich and poor. Between black and white. A meanness of spirit has crept in to the social discourse. I want to challenge it. I want to get in its way. And I don’t know if we can do that with Chekov any more. (Bovell 2014)

The evaluation of this research site now indicates that there are two types of Australian plays most likely to be produced on a contemporary Australian main stage. As mentioned, the first type is an original play which is monocultural, Anglo-realist, modest in cast size and theatrical scope, and authored by a white playwright. The second is an auteur-adapted classic text from the western canon which, to date, has most often been a male director-writer's[18] take on the work of a dead white man. I now turn my attention to the third key area in this survey - female-authored plays.

FEMALE-AUTHORED PLAYS

In *The Doll's Revolution*, Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney remind readers that, by the 1990s, women playwrights had begun to be influential in mainstream Australian theatre. Their book discusses the work of playwrights such as Hannie Rayson, Kath Thomson, Bea Christian, Joanna Murray-Smith and Jenny Kemp who were able to develop bodies of work which stood shoulder to shoulder with plays by their male contemporaries. However, by the mid-2000s, they admit that momentum had been lost, and that the proportion of female-authored plays had begun to decline (Fensham and Varney 2005, 337). Concurrently, in 2006, the NSW Ministry for the Arts and the Australia Council for the Arts enforced the dissolution of Playworks, the National Women Performance Writers' Network. The Australian theatre landscape subsequently lost the only organisation dedicated to the development of female playwrights. As a consequence, female playwrights lost tailored writer-centred programs, playreading events, conferences, publications, an advocacy platform, a corporate memory, and an

[18] Most prominently Benedict Andrews, Tom Wright and Simon Stone.

accessible peer network. The closure of Playworks was an economic rationalisation which I and many others fought without success.[19]

Three years later, in 2009, the Artistic Director of Belvoir Street Theatre, Neil Armfield, launched his 2010 season on a stage populated by young men. One woman was among the line up, Lee Lewis, who would be directing the season's only female-authored play, *That Face* by Polly Stenham. The launch triggered an outcry among female directors and playwrights that, tellingly, Belvoir had not anticipated. As a symbol of unconscious gender bias, it was stark, and a far cry from the Belvoir of the 1980s which had consciously set out to forge a place for women.[20] Armfield's response to the uproar added fuel to the fire. His season, he explained, had been programmed on the basis of merit, the implication being that merit is objective, that women are not effective creative leaders, and that female-authored plays are no match for those penned by men.[21]

Lobbying resulted in the Australia Council for the Arts commissioning the *Women in Theatre* report. Authored by Elaine Lally, in consultation with Sarah Miller, the 2012 report presented research into the continuation of gender disparities that impacted upon the careers of women playwrights, directors and creative leaders. The findings indicated

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[19] Playworks was established in 1985 "with a brief to nurture new women writers, encourage new forms of writing for performance and develop the work of experienced women writers" (Lally 2012, 13). I was on the Playworks board between 1999 and 2006, and valued the fact that it did not champion the well made play (Baxter in Baxter and Newton-Broad 1996, 82), and worked across the borders of text-based plays and contemporary performance. In 2006, the Australian Council and the NSW Ministry for the Arts rationalised national script development was by defunding Playworks and the Australian National Playwrights Centre - two member-led and quite different organisations - but giving them the option to tender jointly for the establishment of one centralised script development agency. I was chair of Playworks in 2006, and involved in the tendering process. The new organisation, Playwriting Australia, was not run by the merger of Playworks and the ANPC, as had been expected. Nor did it reserve a portion of its program for women playwrights, as per the tender. However, as a result of the gender parity issue, PWA currently commissions annual statistics on women playwrights (Lally 2012, 49).

[20] Sarah Miller notes that Gil Appleton had worked with Belvoir's co-founder and inaugural general manager, Chris Westwood, in the early 1980s to insist on the place of women in the arts (http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0682b.htm)

[21] The same debate occurred in Ireland when the Abbey Theatre announced its program celebrating its 1916 centenary. Ninety per cent of the plays in the program were by male playwrights. Director Fiach MacConghail said that, "I'm sorry that I have no female playwrights next season. But I'm not going to produce a play that is not ready and undermine the writer" (Mullaly 2015).

that equity for women had indeed fallen off the agenda, and once again, in Australian theatre, diversity gains had been lost.

> Compiling the research presented in this report has been a somewhat demoralising task. Contrary to what might be expected given that antidiscrimination and affirmative action policies have been in place for many years, it is disappointing to see that, not only has there not been continuous progress towards gender parity, but that there is evidence that things have actually gone backwards over the past decade. (Lally 2012, 47)

In the period from 2001 to 2011, the report found that the companies with the most resources had the poorest scorecard. Just over twenty percent of the productions of Major Performing Arts companies were female-authored plays (Lally 2012, 18).[22] This was a negligible increase on the previous decade where the average was just under twenty percent (Lally 2012, 14). In the sector described by the Theatre Board as Key Organisations, the thirty-seven percent average was markedly better, but still below par when compared to the proportion of productions of male-authored plays (Lally 2012, 20-21).[23]

The *Women in Theatre* report notes that systemic, cultural and socialisation barriers are not easily divisible or discernible. However, the report did identify industry-specific barriers, and these included the leadership model of autonomous Artistic Directors (Lally 2012, 25), the tendency for women to be over-represented in supportive and nurturing, rather than leadership, roles (Lally 2012, 34), company perceptions that women's work involves more risk and has less audience appeal (Lally 2012, 30), critical hostility to women's writing (Lally 2012, 31), and a lack of sustained commitment to the careers of creatives (Lally 2012, 37). Finding a parallel in the business arena, the report stated that:

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[22] Major Performing Arts Companies include Bell Shakespeare, Belvoir Street Theatre, Black Swan, Malthouse, the Melbourne Theatre Company, the Queensland Theatre Company, the State Theatre Company of South Australia, and the Sydney Theatre Company.

[23] For example, the Griffin Theatre Company, Arena Theatre Company, the Australian Theatre for Young People, Brink, Hothouse Theatre, Jute, La Mama, and Red Stitch Actors Theatre.

> A career progression penalty was experienced by women (but not men) who pursued a non-traditional pathway, such as working in the nonprofit, government or education sectors. Women lag in career advancement from their very first post-training post, and continue to fall further behind at each career stage further on. This parallels the observation in theatre that women are much better represented in education, community theatre, youth theatre and regional areas, that is, in the areas that are poorly paid, under-resourced, low status, and encounter difficulties progressing further. It has been suggested that what women encounter is not so much a 'glass ceiling' as a 'sticky floor', exacerbated by stereotypes about women being good communicators, teachers, trainers and nurturers. (Lally 2012, 39)

As one of many women who had worked in alternative theatre - community theatre, youth theatre, and theatre for young people for example - the notion of a "sticky floor" which holds back women playwrights and directors made sense of my first-hand experience and anecdotal knowledge. It also concurred with the findings of the *Playing with Time* survey (Chesterman 1995) which twenty years earlier had acknowledged that within Australia this sector had been regarded as the "soft" end of theatre, having been difficult for the women involved because their work tended to be marginalised, paid poorly, and essentialised as caring and nurturing (Chesterman 1995, 37-38). The stigma associated with "soft" theatre,[24] along with the concentration of women who had worked in this sector, and the compromised aesthetic quality of some productions due to a focus on process over product (Thomson 1998, 110), no doubt helped to inculcate an unconscious bias that women are primarily social workers rather than artists, and that women playwrights are second-rate or less technically-proficient. For example, playwright Kate Mulvaney was once asked who had written the war sections of her play *The Seed* (2008), the assumption being that a woman could not write content beyond personal and domestic spheres.

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[24] In *What is an Australian play? Have we failed our ethnic writers?* Chris Mead states that community theatre has come to be viewed with "disdain" (Mead 2008, 32).

Such underestimations are particularly vexing for women playwrights who experiment with form. As playwright Christine Evans noted in a recent lecture, women experimenting with form tend to be reviewed as not knowing what they are doing because women, the thinking goes, just 'can't do structure'.[25] This echoes an earlier experience of playwright Noëlle Janaczewska who once asked "Why did reviewers keep on telling me the 'rules' of theatre? Did they imagine I didn't know what I was doing, and if they 'put me right' I'd be OK!" (Janaczewska quoted in Chesterman 1995, 36). Perhaps such skewed thinking was behind the decision to commission only male playwrights to write the plethora of Bicentennial plays;[26] and perhaps explains why, until very recently, men have monopolised the adaptations of classics and the bulk of resources allocated to the production of Australian plays.

It seems that career progression penalties are still brought about by the essentialisation of women playwrights. It also seems that penalties are still reasonably guaranteed if a woman playwright aligns herself with radical politics or uses non-traditional dramatic forms. Yet, as Helen Thomson points out, a "tradition of radicalism was the first distinctive marker of women's writing for the theatre in Australia" (Thomson 1998, 105). In the inter-war years, Betty Roland, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Dymphna Cusack, Oriel Gray and Mona Brand each wrote plays which challenged patriarchal values, and experimented with "more radical theatrical modes such as agit-prop theatre, drawn primarily from Marxist theorisation" (Thomson 1998, 105). In the ensuing decades, playwrights such as Dorothy Hewett and Alma De Groen, and the female theatre collectives of the 1970s, continued the tradition of critiquing the patriarchy while exploring diverse and radical theatre modes. However, the plays of these women have been "firmly marginalised" from theatre programming (Thomson 1998, 104). Contrastingly, female-authored plays which conform to the text/character/narrative

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[25] Christine Evans made this point during her paper War Plays and Ghost Stories which was delivered on 12 July at the 2013 ADSA conference.

[26] *Capricornia* by Louis Nowra, *1841* by Michael Gow, *Faces in the Street* by Frank Hardy, *Barungin* by Jack Davis, *Manning Clark's History of Australia: the Musical* by Tim Robertson and Don Watson with John Romeril, *Black Rabbit* by Ray Mooney, and *Hate* by Stephen Sewel (McCallum 2009, 230).

paradigm of the "masculine" norm (Thomson 1998, 114) have not.[27] As Thomson states, "the price of mainstream theatre productions would seem to be the loss of the radicalism which was posited as a marker of feminist theatre" (1998, 116).

My survey of female-authored plays within the Australian theatre landscape prompts me to highlight one stark example of a career progression penalty meted out to contemporary female playwright Patricia Cornelius. A founding member of Melbourne Worker's Theatre, Cornelius has a vast and solid body of work which is uncompromising in content, form and politics, and has won many awards. In 2006, I attended a play reading of her play *Do Not Go Gentle…* The play had complete control of its form, a seamless ease with its shifting temporal borders that gradually revealed a complex narrative conflation of Scott's doomed Antarctic expedition with the winter years of dementia patients facing their own mortality and regrets. In a sophisticated unfolding, the play cast older performers in a redefinition of the notion of hero, not as conquerer, but as one whose love can endure failure. Its transporting form, intelligent and compassionate reframing of the hero myth, and mature handling of a difficult and poignant theme would, I was sure, secure *Do Not Go Gentle…* a well-deserved prestige production on a state theatre company stage. Director Julian Meyrick was turned down by nearly every major theatre company in the country (Meyrick 2014, 70) before he produced the play independently at the intimate fortyfivedownstairs theatre in 2012 to sellout houses and strong reviews. The play subsequently won or was nominated for every major playwrighting award in the country (Meyrick 2014, 70), taking out the peer-bestowed Australian Writer's Guild Award for Stage, as well as the Major Award which is awarded to the outstanding script of that year across all categories. However, to date, *Do Not Go Gentle…* has not received a production on an Australian main stage. In the words of Meyrick:

> it was as if its success did not fit into some unconscious industry agenda […]. The industry response to *Do Not Go Gentle…* was a disgrace and it

[27] Thomson gives Hannie Rayson, Johanna Murray Smith and Katherine Thomson as examples. However, she also cautions that "it would be simplistic to equate aesthetic formalism with conservative sexual politics, since the social and political problems of women can still be the major focus of realist plays" (Thomson 1998, 114).

> was at that point I realised that something had gone badly wrong with our approach to Australian drama" (Meyrick 2014, 70-71).

Given the findings in this survey, one may speculate on the reasons why a play of such obvious calibre might garner no interest from main stage producers: it is an original large cast new Australian play; it is authored by a female playwright aligned to radical politics; and despite that fact that Cornelius had "segued her authorial values with the expectations of a broader theatre-going public" (Meyrick 2014, 70-71), neither the play nor the playwright were acceptable to the mainstream boundary riders. While Cornelius is not the first female playwright to be sidelined despite the merit of her work, this sequence of events did jolt the contemporary playwrighting community, and prompt playwright Andrew Bovell to write an article in which he asked, is our best work really still not good enough? (Bovell 2012, 67).

Cornelius, and contemporary audiences, must live with the loss of *Do Not Go Gentle…* not receiving a main stage production. So too, in all likelihood, must our theatre history. Whether symptomatic of unconscious gender bias or establishment aesthetic preference, or the result of neglect, the ongoing exclusion of the plays by major female playwrights from Australian main stages locks their plays out of the repertoires and discourses which shape the Australian theatrical canon. It deprives contemporary theatre practitioners of a working knowledge of the innovations and assertiveness of their female forebears, denies contemporary female playwrights access to an empowering lineage, and continues to perpetuate skewed perceptions that women playwrights are not capable of writing plays of insight, magnitude, relevance or skill. Patricia Cornelius, Christine Evans, and Noëlle Janaczewska are three major female playwrights who conclusively disprove this last perception. With countless national and international awards between them, including Janaczewska's 2014 Wyndham Campbell Literary prize from Yale University, valued at $US160,000, their place in the canon is deserved, but unfortunately, not assured. Like many of their Australian female forebears, they may be penalised for being too political, too maverick, too critical, or too feminist.

The evaluation of this research site - the Australian theatre landscape - reveals a main stage production preference for Australian plays which are auteur-adapted classics, or less frequently, are original, small cast, monocultural and Anglo-realist. It also reveals a considerable preference for male-authored plays, which typically comprise between sixty and eighty percent of a company's annual program. Female-authored plays are included if the dramatic form employed conforms to mainstream aesthetic norms, but in proportions which indicate increasing disparity with the works of men. I will now turn my attention to the lesbian-themed plays.

LESBIAN-THEMED PLAYS

In *Queering the Australian Stage* (1996), Bruce Parr stated that, since the 1970s, Australian playwrights "have been able to explore homosexual themes and represent openly homosexual characters" (Parr 1996, 7). However, the homosexuality openly depicted was male homosexuality: for example, Peter Kenna's *The Cassidy Album* (1978), Clem Gorman's *A Manual of Trench Warfare* (1980), Michael Gow's *The Kid* (1983) and Nick Enright's *Mongrels* (1991). While the critical reception may have been anxious, avoidant or hostile (Parr 1996, 7), gay-themed plays such as these were able to enter the Australian repertoire, and their male playwrights were able to establish careers, and benefit from the imperceptible merging of gay and mainstream theatre that occurred during the 1990s (Parr 1998, 92). However, there was "no comparable presence of lesbian characters in Australian mainstream theatre" (Parr 1998, 91), and no establishment of lesbian-themed theatre within a "still largely male-dominated industry" (Kelly 1998, 13-14). Since major Australian theatre companies had neglected women playwrights in general, Parr expresses no surprise that lesbian voices were specifically absent from our stages (Parr 1998, 91).

This absence is symptomatic of "The Great Silence" (Greenaway 1990,11), a term used by Jai Greenaway to denote the erasure of lesbian woman and experience from mainstream history and culture. In her book *Politics Acts; Lesbian Theatre in Sydney* (1990), she describes how heterosexism, homophobia, and the hegemonic enforcement of what Adrienne Rich called "compulsory heterosexuality" have denied lesbian women

a positive reflection in mainstream culture, and led to the destruction of records of their existence (Greenaway 1990, 11). As a canon of lesbian literature and drama emerged, it therefore consisted of works that had survived despite the odds, had been "relegated to second rate and underground production", or had been heavily disguised for heterosexist society (Greenaway 1990, 11).

Unsurprisingly, when lesbian performance groups and theatre companies began to organise events in Sydney in the 1980s, confronting the issue of lesbian invisibility was a driving force (Greenaway 1990, 29). Out of necessity, and by choice, they operated outside of traditional theatre networks and practices. Needing first to create spaces in which lesbian women could become visible to themselves on their own terms, numerous "discrete companies" (Greenaway 1990, 10) began to stage events in safe and separatist environments such as dances, festivals or conferences.[28] By controlling audience composition, and avoiding "the spectre of straight interference", open theatrical expression, via a private methodology, could be given to lesbian pride (Greenaway 1990, 11). Performers tended to be untrained volunteers who acquired their theatre skills through the feminist movement (Greenaway 1990, 40), and later created works in a range of non-realist styles which aligned with the heritage of street theatre and women's circus, and were passed on within the wider lesbian community (Greenaway 1990, 41). Interestingly, Peta Tait notes that this type of practice informed the development of a distinct genre of physical feminist theatre which may be "a uniquely Australian development in international women's performance" (Tait 1994, 4). If this is the case, the methodological and aesthetic originality of lesbian theatre in Australia has made a lasting and uniquely vernacular contribution to our performance and theatre culture.

In the 1980s, lesbian performance groups and theatre companies created a surge in lesbian performance "previously unseen in Australia" (Greenaway 1990, 15). However, a reading of Greenaway's account reveals that the pioneering women who took on the responsibility of creating lesbian-themed theatre had to do so at some risk, and with considerable courage and tenacity. They were not universally "out" beyond the confines

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[28] For example, the Radikal Thesbians Theatre Company, Witch Theatre, Fast Women, and Wicked Women.

of the theatre group, or expected to be so, and took part in productions knowing that threats, harassment and social ostracism were possible consequences of their participation (Greenaway 1990, 16). Within an overarching political commitment to a notion of sisterhood (Greenaway 1990, 24), they had to negotiate complex and evolving social dynamics as they facilitated collectivist creative processes, and negotiated ideological and class differences as well as overlapping identity formations. Unwittingly, they were conducting a form of community cultural development within their own community, but without the benefit of training, experience or funding. Finally, they also had to contend with the ongoing reinforcement of their invisibility; the annual Sydney Mardi Gras festival disproportionately resourced and publicised gay male events (Greenaway 1990, 81), while mainstream reviewers routinely ignored the lesbian component of the festival altogether (Parr 1998, 91).

In terms of text-based theatre, lesbian theatre companies in the early 1980s had to purchase plays from Britain or the United States, or adapt, group-devise, or write their own material. Within a decade, during the diversity boom, lesbian-themed Australian plays began to enjoy some success beyond the lesbian community, most notably with companies such as the women's theatre Vitalstatistix in Adelaide, the independent company La Mama in Melbourne, the alternative Performance Space in Sydney, and the fledgling Belvoir Street. Lesbian-themed Australian plays produced by these companies included *Vita - A Fantasy* (1989) by Sara Hardy, *The Gay Divorcee* (1990) by Margaret Fischer, and *Framework* (1983) and *Is That You Nancy?* (1991) by Sandra Shotlander.[29]

The first lesbian-themed Australian play to make an incursion into the mainstream was *Pinball* (1981) by Alison Lyssa (Parr 1998, 91). *Pinball* employed a complex clash of style and genre to boldly explore the then uncharted debate of lesbian child custody. It was produced with probable reluctance during Nimrod Theatre's Women and Theatre Project (Parr 1996, 8), and within a vexed social and political context. The theatre industry, and the mainstream critics, were openly hostile to feminism (Parr referring to

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[29] Sandra Shotlander's plays have enjoyed greater success internationally. I note Rosemary Curb's article 'Mirrors Moving beyond Frames: Sandra Shotlander's *Framework* and *Blind Salome*' which was published in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, edited by Linda Hart.

Chris Westwood's report on the Project, 1996, 17). The general temper of the times was anti-feminist (Greenaway 1990, 19), and lesbian content was an "anathema" (Greenaway 1990, 32). While Michael Gow's first play, a gay-themed work called *The Kid* (1983), launched his career, Alison Lyssa's lesbian-themed and exuberantly anti-realist play, which Parr described as reminiscent of the work of Patrick White and Dorothy Hewett (Parr 1996, 19), was critically cruelled and career-limiting. Despite international recognition, and the play's publication by Methuen in the UK, Lyssa was unable to secure an agent, and spent the ensuing decade in playwrighting silence except for her work on community theatre projects (Chesterton and Baxter 1995, 32-33).

The Australian reception of *Pinball* illustrates two overlapping issues Australian female playwrights faced in the 1980s and 1990s, and I would argue, continue to face to today:

> For many women writers the struggle to be taken seriously includes a struggle to gain acceptance for content and form which offer a strong challenge to standard perspectives. (Chesterton and Baxter 1995, 32)[30]

Nimrod Theatre retreated from its dalliance with lesbian content, and lesbian-themed plays were not programmed by mainstream theatre companies - if they were authored by an Australian female playwright. However, lesbian-themed plays by playwrights from abroad were staged by the Sydney Theatre Company and Belvoir Street. According to Greenway, these plays were either male-authored, negatively stereotypical of lesbians, or devoid of erotic feeling (Greenaway 1990); according to Parr, in production, they were usually mishandled or de-eroticised (Parr 1998, 96). From the examples Greenaway gives - Lilian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, Frank Marcus' *The Killing of Sister George*,[31] and Win Wells' *Gertrude Stein and Companion* - one can

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[30] For example, Sandra Shotlander's play *Is That You Nancy?* was rejected by Playbox Theatre because it "would mainly have 'curiosity' value… for those of like persuasion, but not (be) of broad appeal" (Shotlander quoted in Chesterman and Baxter 1995, 33); a lesbian-themed play by Mardi McConnochie was denounced as "disgusting" immediately after its reading at the 1989 Australian National Playwrights' Conference (McConnochie paraphrased in Chesterman and Baxter 1995, 34).

[31] With some incredulity, I note that the 1965 play *The Killing of Sister George* by Frank Marcus was revived for the 2016 Sydney Mardi Gras program.

certainly see either a predominance of male writers, or of content which does not offer "a strong challenge to standard perspectives" (Chesterton and Baxter 1995, 32), including the ubiquitous "predatory or tragic" lesbian stereotype (Moss 2009, 12).

In the wake of the 1990s economic contraction, lesbian-themed plays, like other plays which represented difference and diversity, retreated from our stages. Male homosexuality had managed to move from "transgressive fringe theatre to mainstream status", but plays about women's sexuality did not manage to gain any significant foothold (Alana Valentine quoted in Chesterman and Baxter 1995, 34). Apart from *The Conjurers* (1997) by Alana Valentine, *Rodeo Noir* (1997) by Andrea Lemon, *Relative Comfort* (1999) by Gina Schien, *A History of Water* (1992) by Noelle Janaczewska, *The Marigold Hour* (2000) by Catherine Fargher, *Love* (2005) by Patricia Cornelius, and *The Rood Screen* (2006) by Donna Abela, it is difficult to recall a full length lesbian-themed Australian play produced during the last two decades, especially one which was not programmed during the Mardi Gras Festival in Sydney, the Midsumma Festival in Melbourne, or Feast in Adelaide; that is, was not confined to a queer festival context. It was also clear that lesbian-themes could be added to the list of attributes a play needed to omit if it was intended for production on an Australian main stage.

A CALL TO ARMS

When I commenced this research project, I had wanted to contribute a formally innovative and culturally diverse play to the Australian repertoire, and honour the promise of the diversity boom which had shaped the values which underpin my practice. However, my evaluation of the site of contemporary Australian theatre revealed that *Jump for Jordan* had next to no chance of being included in the program of a main stage theatre company, since it would be a cross-cultural and lesbian-themed original play with a reasonably large cast penned by a female and feminist playwright. Moreover, my evaluation revealed much more than the programming tendencies of the major performing arts companies. It revealed that the tier with the greatest amount of government subsidy, financial security and audience reach had closed ranks against plays which represented Australian society as culturally and ideologically diverse, and

was part of the apparatus which perpetuates what Robyn Archer describes as "the myth of the mainstream" (Archer 2005, 2), that is, the fabricated view that Australian society is homogenous and white.

I knew from experience, and from regular calls to redress gender and racial disparity in Australian theatre, that ground gained by the diversity boom of the 1990s had been lost. However, I was taken aback by the extent of boundary riding within the major performing arts sector, and by the ferocity of establishment disfavour that historically had been meted out to homegrown expressions of independent and self-determining vitality that diverged from the dominant ideological framework, be that lesbian, female, feminist, non-realist, non-white or Leftist. The de-centring verve of alternative perspectives has rarely gotten passed the main stage gate keepers, and presently, due to the latest round of cuts to the Federal arts budget, is facing another generational setback.[32] What is being excluded, I believe, is a confident native voice of adaptive daring that is attuned to the realities of the global south, and capable of resisting the colonial sense of inadequacy inculcated by a dominant discourse which clings to imported cultural norms from a faded imperial centre. If John McCallum is correct in saying that the search for belonging is the core theme of Australian drama (MaCallum

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[32] In the 2015-2016 Budget, the Abbott Government again targeted the creative sector. Federal Arts Minister George Brandis removed $104.8 million from the Australia Council's budget over the following four years, and redirected the funds to a new agency, the 'National Centre for Excellence in the Arts' (now called Catalyst) which would grant funds at the discretion of the Arts Minister, not according to peer review, raising serious questions regarding creative freedom and independence. The funding cuts, which would affect the small-to-medium sector only, galvanised the sector, led to protests, and prompted 2719 individuals and organisations to lodge submissions before the Senate's Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee which was tasked with an inquiry into the matter. The AMPAG companies maintained their quarantined funding base. Circus Oz, the State Theatre Company of South Australia, and eventually, the Melbourne Theatre Company, were the only AMPAG companies to speak out about the cuts. I was reminded of a quote about state theatre companies by Richard Fotheringham - "Their interests are against diversity; they seek to destroy alternatives, not to assist or lead them; not to sail proudly guarding a fleet of smaller ships, but to blow them out of the water" (Fotheringham 1993, 28). On 13 May 2016, the impact of the budget cut hit home when the Australian Council announced that sixty-two previously-funded organisations did not receive four year operational funding. This time, many AMPAG companies, under the banner of the Confederation of Australian State Theatre Companies (CAST) immediately called upon the Federal government to formally review its budget cuts to the Australia Council. They stated that the cuts and subsequent defunding of arts organisations would "cause a devastating cultural and employment deficit with widespread and long-lasting impact". (http://www.statetheatrecompany.com.au/home/news/newsarchive/cast-calls-on-federal-government-to-reinstate-australia-council-funds/)

2009), then the creative confluence of resident cultures and antipodean perspectives is the best grounding we can give this search, especially if we are to evolve from a colonial to a post-colonial consciousness, from a derivative to an independent and self-determining people.

I felt this conviction too strongly to contemplate adjusting my creative project *Jump for Jordan* to better align with main stage requirements. Apart from the fact that a monocultural Anglo-realist treatment would be antithetical to my project aims, I wanted the world of *Jump for Jordan* to assume a culturally complex and evolving social context, and welcome voices that will subvert and confront privilege and power (Mead 2008, 44). In 2014, in a lecture entitled *Harold Pinter at the Ivy*, playwright Andrew Bovell gave voice to my conviction. Issuing what amounted to a call to arms, he urged Australian playwrights to tackle our contested histories, to reach for co-existence, and to keep fighting (Bovell 2014). Rather than be reined in, Bovell said that it was time for playwrights to throw caution to the wind, to withstand the enforcement of an official cultural paradigm that is predicated on a tripartite notion of white, male and European supremacy. Given what had been revealed by my site evaluation, it had become clear that *Jump for Jordan* needed to be a cultural intervention in step with Bovell's sentiments. This placed a conundrum at the heart of my creative project: I wished to place culturally diverse characters on an Australian main stage, and to do so effectively, but could not employ the forms and styles which would increase my chance of reaching these stages as they inhibited aesthetic ambition and perpetuated an official paradigm which marginalised and excluded difference. However, by applying feminist tools - the active verbs to oppose, to disturb, to activate - I had arrived at a set of firm decisions and principles by which to proceed: I would oppose the categorisations promulgated by the dominant cultural paradigm, and perpetuated by monologic and monocultural forms of representation; I would disturb the processes which institutionalise Anglo-realism and the 'inevitability' of white-centric theatre" (Lewis 2007, 1-4); and I would activate a "sphere of doing for the purposes of 'undoing'" (Aston 1999, 18) predicated on the principles of courageous advance (as opposed to retreat), and an imaginative engagement with the Other which sees the Other not as a threat but as not-yet-known.

Playwright Lally Katz once described her playwriting career as "a balancing act between apocalypse and hope". In the current cultural climate, where this description fits the career of most Australian playwrights, including my own, Katz's recommendation that "we should want to be humbled by each others' work", want nothing less than the best that we can collectively offer, made more sense to me than succumbing to capitulation or despair.[33]

[33] Lally Katz made these comments during her keynote address at the *Playwriting Festival*, 29 March 2014, hosted by the NSW Writers' Centre, Sydney.

EXCAVATION

An excavation claims a site, gives it a boundary, and systematically exposes and takes apart the site's stratigraphy or layered deposits during a search for artefacts. Great care is taken to record the context of the artefact, its position in time and space, and to identify its relationship to the physical and cultural circumstances contained within the deposits. In this section, I equate excavation with the process of writing the first draft of *Jump for Jordan* during which I investigate the key research question:

> *Can culturally-diverse characters be placed on an Australian main stage effectively by developing dramaturgical strategies influenced by feminist theory and aesthetics?*

I work within the definition of feminist theatre provided by Elaine Aston, and employ the three active verbs used in her definition - to oppose, to disturb, to activate - as tools to dig through four layers of creation: character, structure, language and psychic space. I use these tools also to ensure that the creative work evolves in accordance with my project aims and creative rationale.

CHARACTER

To place culturally diverse characters on an Australian main stage effectively, I had to create characters which did not conform to the stereotypes promulgated by the dominant cultural paradigm. I would thereby oppose the default conceptual settings within our linguistic and representational systems which categorised the Other, in all its manifestations, as inferior. I am here referring specifically to binary logic, the hierarchical ordering of opposites embedded in our language, and stridently interrogated within feminist theory for its categorical fixity and violent ability to silence the "inferior" half of coupled terms. Revisiting texts by Hélène Cixous, Annette Kuhn, A. R. Jones, Elaine Aston, Sue-Ellen Case and Judith Butler, I was reminded that the masculine has been categorised as a superior, sovereign and unified subject (Jones 1985). He is "the central reference point of an epistemology built on a set of

hierarchical oppositions in which 'man' […] always occupies the privileged position: self/other, subject/object, presence/absence, law/chaos, man/woman" (Jones 1985). He is locked into a chain of superior associations which places the masculine at the exalted centre of the Symbolic order, and therefore, at the centre of culture, cultural production, and the law. The feminine, on the other hand, has been subordinated beneath the "great masculine imposture" (Cixous 1986) which fixes her as the weaker half of the conceptual couple (Shiach 1991, 7). She is "ever her moon to the masculine sun, nature to culture, concavity to masculine convexity, matter to form, immobility/inertia to the march of progress, terrain trod by the masculine footstep, vessel" (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 44). Within linguistic, cultural and social systems which construct the feminine as "marginal and alien" (Aston 1999, 9), the feminine subject is ontologically problematised (Aston 1999, 9). Outside of the Symbolic order, she is at a "cultural zero point" (Jones 1985). However, to paraphrase Sue-Ellen Case, the very notion of the female is enough to disrupt the male order (Case 1993, 13). By making a sizeable female cast a production requirement of *Jump for Jordan*, and by overlapping female, Arabic and lesbian identities, I was overturning the marginalising mechanisms and disrupting the paradigm which traditionally placed the Anglo-white-masculine subject at the centre of Australian theatre. These character choices resisted the "role-playing on which society has come to depend" (Breslauer and Keyssar 1992, 178), and aimed, as Butler states, to assert that the "radical dependency" of the masculine subject on the female other is "illusionary" and culturally constructed (Butler 2008, xxx).

Gender

Reflecting upon the feminist interrogations of the Symbolic order enabled me to see that, within the world of the play, the main ideological battlefield was gender, not race, possibly due to the female-heavy dramatic personae and my feminist practice. In the following excerpt, Sophia's inability to conform to Mara's feminine ideal of a bridesmaid quickly escalates into a threat of exclusion:

MARA Vince's sisters, all beautiful, all the same size. But you, look at you. Thick legs, long waist, no bust. I'll have to mix up three sizes to make your dress fit properly.

SOPHIE Primmed up and pretty. Good luck.

MARA Too hard? No problem. Leave.

SOPHIE Mum -

MARA Three more years, go!

(*Jump for Jordan*, scene 5)

Mara, I realised, was an enforcer of patriarchal imperatives. She has raised her daughters in accordance with rigid gender prescriptions, and expects them to comply with these as adult women or face penalties which include being disowned. Her gender prescription, while valuing the education of a woman, nevertheless demands that her daughters leave the family home only after they are married. To do otherwise is to bring shame upon the family and incur Mara's wrath. Mara's "cultural compulsion" (Butler 2008, 11) is an option for Loren. She stays close to the family nest, avoids scandal and confrontation, and is planning her imminent wedding. She is an exemplar of Mara's stable and coherent feminine ideal. For Sophia, however, compliance with this ideal is not an option because it is a hegemonic fantasy which presumes "heterosexual normativity" (Butler 1990/2008, xiv).

When I began to write the play, I was constructing a simple good daughter / bad daughter dichotomy. However, as I wrote, the sisters' differing strategies to cope with this patriarchal "imposture" (Cixous 1986), and not shame their family, began substantially to drive the plot. Sophia, conditionally readmitted to the family, agrees to masquerade as Mara's ideal in front of Aunt Azza, whereas Loren, the recipient of family approval, is trying to secure her freedom by marrying a man she does not love. What emerged from the characters' attempts to live up to this non-negotiable gender

ideal was a three-way lie since Mara, Loren and Sophia spend much of the play pretending to be what they are not. This equivocal mode became a pivotal device in the play. It enabled me to create humour at the expense of a rigid gender stereotype and, as I will discuss, to develop an overall aesthetic which was dialogic. Importantly for my project's aim to reach a main stage audience effectively, it also allowed me to employ dramatic irony, a mechanism predicated on audience inclusion and complicity, and in this play, dependent upon this bi-lingual text being written entirely in English.[34] By always letting the audience in on the joke, and in on the language, I had created a way to include the audience and alleviate some of their possible resistance.

Lesbian

For much of the play, Sophia and Loren are prepared to pursue personal freedom by temporarily denying their lived experience and relinquishing autonomy over their own actions and bodies. While they both live in conflict with rigid gender prescriptions, only Sophia has to contend with the religious and social taboo on lesbianism. From my friendship networks, testimonials obtained from queer Arab websites,[35] and the social experience of the play's Arabic-speaking cast members, I understood the need for many queer Arabic people to live an equivocal life. That is, to maintain family peace and bonds by not disclosing their sexuality, or identifying as gay or lesbian, while outwardly conforming to patriarchal roles and possibly even meeting marriage obligations. Therefore, when Mara conditionally invites Sophia back into the family fold, I decided that Sophia could not mention her lesbian sexuality but, ably assisted by the fact that heterosexuality is a "foundational fiction" (Butler 2008, 4), could rely on the fact that her family would assume that she is straight. Furthermore, I decided that Avenging Azza could plausibly try to force Sophia into an arranged marriage because Sophia's desire for appeasement of her family could win out over sexual desire in this case.

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[34] Had *Jump for Jordan* been written for an alternative theatre context, this strategy may have given way to a bi-lingual treatment.

[35] For example, the Bint el Nas website sponsored by the Queer Cultural Centre San Francisco.

The conventional western stereotype that lesbians are either "predatory or tragic" (Moss 2009, 12) also had to be opposed. Sophia may be paranoid and undisciplined and inwardly racist, but she is not dangerous, pathetic or deranged by her sexual preference. Nor is her relationship with Sam portrayed as infantile or dysfunctional. Instead, I normalise their lesbianism by showing that their relationship is unproblematic for them, and within contemporary Australian social frameworks. What *is* portrayed as problematic is their differing cultural perspectives on the matter. Sam has never been a "closet case" (*Jump for Jordan*, scene 21). She can not understand Sophia's decision not to come out to her family, not to claim a lesbian identity, and instead, to choose an equivocal life. In scene twenty-one Sam asks, "But, you're loved, I love you, wouldn't your family be thrilled to know that?" Sophia replies, "A hundred percent no way in hell." Sam's subsequent decision to head to the desert to reflect on their relationship is due to her feelings of being negated by Sophia, not because lesbians are essentially tragic or lesbian relationships inherently doomed. By normalising lesbian characters and relationships, the play could activate a sphere in which the lesbian stereotype was challenged and undone.

Arabic

The signs of masculine and feminine are culturally encoded with the ideological biases of the patriarchy (Case 1993, 116-117). So too is the sign of the Arab within Western culture as it joins the feminine among binary logic's conceptual chain of inferiority (Butler 2008, 4). Like gender and lesbian stereotypes, the Arabic or Orientalist stereotype is "discursively constituted" (Butler 2008, 4) as different within the dominant paradigm, and used as a tool of cultural domination (Said 1995, 25). Negatively inscribed by the stereotype's producer, the Oriental is a European invention (Said 1995, 1), a fantasy of the West projected as truth (Abood 2007, 52).

In my attempt to oppose the Arabic stereotype which popularly and politically essentialises people from the Middle East as irrational, hostile and violent, I aimed to place characters from Middle Eastern backgrounds at the centre of an Australian main

stage. As I was completing the first draft during the Arab Spring,[36] I was very aware of the widespread peace and democracy movements within the Arab world, and this, combined with my reading on Palestine, influenced my decision to weave a counter-narrative about peace into *Jump for Jordan*. I therefore sought out contemporary Middle Eastern voices which worked for peace, called for self-determination, and could serve as character models for Azza, Sahir and Layla.

My portrayal of Aunt Azza needed to oppose the Western perception that Middle Eastern women are universally uneducated and oppressed. The play's need for her to be educated, independent and progressive drew me to the work of Palestinian peace negotiator Hanan Ashrawi and Israeli educator Arna Mer-Kermis. In Ashrawi, I discovered a fierce female intellect who worked with the Palestine National Council (the parliament in exile) to broker peace settlements and build institutions in anticipation of Palestinian self rule (Ashrawi 1996). In Mer-Kermis I discovered an Israeli communist who established a learning centre, and the forerunner to Freedom Theatre, in a refugee camp in the West Bank town of Jenin (Arna's Children 2004). Researching the lives of these woman provided the foundation for the character of Aunt Azza. However, that foundation had to be based on personal rather than political conviction because, when scripted, strident views always came across as polemic and sat uncomfortably within the world of the play. This research also led me to discover the present day cultural activism of the Freedom Theatre, and to learn about the Artistic Director, Juliano Mer-Kermis, Arna's son, who was murdered outside the theatre in 2011. In Juliano Mer-Kermis, I had found a model for the character and fate of Layla, and a story which informed the activist subplot which united Layla, Azza and Sahir.

Given the preponderance of images in the media which align Arabic masculinity with violent fanaticism, the character of Sahir always needed to be gentle and peace-loving. Such a character already lived in my imagination due to a strong memory of a noble and quiet Afghani doctor I had worked with in 1993.[37] As I wrote, the doctor's demeanour

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[36] Democratic uprisings that spread across the Arab world in 2011.

[37] He was a participant in the community-based theatre project in Auburn NSW, *One in a Million,* produced by Death-Defying Theatre in 1993. I regret that I do not remember his name.

of quiet peace and grief worked its way into Sahir. I was also influenced by Elias Chacour (2003) and AbdelFattah Abusrour (2012) who each have written eloquently on the need to fight the occupation by building peace within.

Dramatis Personae

While the catalyst for *Jump for Jordan* was a drive to challenge discourses which essentialise Middle Eastern people as irrational and violent, the dramatis personae came to reflect my broader commitment to the representation of difference per se: five of the six characters are either Jordanian or Palestinian or children of this combined heritage; five are female; three are approximately sixty years old; and two are lesbian. In one or more ways, each character is differentiated as Other, and therefore inferior, within Western thought. Additionally, the characters have overlapping identity formations, most importantly Sophia whose subjectivity is culturally hybrid, homosexual, and pivotal to the play's narrative and structure. *Jump for Jordan* resides among the new forms of third-wave feminism which have expanded their scope from gender to include difference per se in their critique of inequality (Gillis and Munford 2006, 167-68). It is also a play which stands by the following quote from Julia Kristeva: "call it 'woman' or 'oppressed classes of society', it is the same struggle, and never one without the other" (as cited in Moi 1985, 164).

STRUCTURE

These character and content choices allowed me to oppose categorisations promulgated by the dominant culture to disturb the centrality of the white-Anglo-male subject, and to challenge the "inevitability of white-centric theatre" (Lewis 2007, 1-4). While I could proceed with confidence that my characters were serving the aims of my creative project, I was still to discover a structure which would do likewise. However, as a guide, the evaluation stage of this research had revealed that a courageous advance, and an imaginative engagement with the Other, needed to be basic dramaturgical tenets. In order to discover the strategies which would activate such principles, I proceeded by applying the feminist tool of disturbance to traditional dramatic writing convention, and

taking up what Cixous describes as a "gift of departure" (Cixous 1981). This entailed turning away from story patterns and templates of all kinds, and instead exploring the patters and propositions within the play's content.

A sphere of disturbance

> Classical plays and theatrical conventions can now be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing real women and replacing them with masks of patriarchal production. (Case 1993, 7)

I knew from my existing feminist theatre practice that the classical theatre tradition had been built upon the active exclusion of women. Rereading Sue-Ellen Case's book *Feminism and Theatre* (1993), I was reminded that the classic plays of Athenian, Roman and Elizabethan drama were all produced by cultures that had denied women, and the corporeal female body, access to the stage (Case 1993, 12). This exclusion is evident in The Poetics, Aristotle's treatise on classical Greek tragedy, which "expands the patriarchal prejudice against women" (Case 1993, 16) by addressing a male reader, and establishing a class or rank-based criteria which stipulates that female characters must not be clever, display authority of deliberation, or have the right to speak (Case 1993, 18). As a dramatic writing student, practitioner and teacher, I have been well aware that "the aristotelian directive" (Hart 1992, 3-4) still underpins much dramatic writing pedagogy and convention, particularly in the screenwriting arena. As Lynda Hart states in her introduction to *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, it still exercises "a powerful and lasting hold on the drama, dictating a linear structure that 'imitates an action' embedded in conflict, climaxes, recognitions, and resolutions" (Hart 1992, 3). As far as Aristotle's gender bias is concerned, I do not think it is consciously applied in the twenty-first century.

However, I do note that a significant proportion of mainstream films still portray women as an adjunct to men.[38]

Traditional dramatic structure, and the mimetic genre of realism, would not serve the ambition of my creative project. Under the guise of objectivity, they would fix and shape reality and assert a natural order (Hart 1992, 3-4) which would reinforce patriarchal biases and imperatives, and contain and distort the Other. As Aston notes, feminist theatre practice aims to disturb such "en-gendering" (Aston 1999, 18) processes, and may do so by operating formally and ideologically as a "sphere of disturbance" (Aston 1999, 17).

The gift of departure

While I had long ceased to think about my plays in terms of female writing or a female text, I nevertheless took from my prior study of the work of Hélène Cixous a method of escaping a system of "stagnant categories" (Benmussa 1979, 21) and disturbing traditional forms, by commencing a creative writing process with a "gift of departure" (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 53). That is, I approach writing as a "signal to depart" (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 53), as a parting gift which permits escape from the bounds of the masculine gaze and command (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 52-53). In their article "Castration or decapitation?" Cixous and Kuhn urge women writers to "set out into the unknown to look for themselves" (52-53). As applied to my practice, I understand this to mean that my creative agency is best served by a departure from conventional and externally-derived dramatic templates, and a journey into the unmapped world of the play to discover patterns and propositions implicit within the content as I attune myself to a discerning bodily-felt awareness or gut instinct. In this way, the work of Cixous helped me to develop a creative practice which is founded on

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[38] As a teaching tool, I use the Bechdel Test which was devised by Alison Bechdel in 1985 to highlight gender representation in film and to reveal implicit gender bias where it exists. The Test asks the question, does this film have at least two female characters, with names, who talk to each other about something other than a man? Examples of recent films which fail to reach this low benchmark include *The Big Short*, *Bridge of Spies*, *The Revenant*, *The Social Network*, *Avatar*, *Gravity*, *Slum Dog Millionaire*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Fargo*, *Her*, *Gladiator* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

the belief that I am my primary creative resource, and that my writing is more potent and intricate if I first engage in a process of attending to a work's emergent capacity rather than imposing structures upon it. My quest for the structure of *Jump for Jordan* therefore consisted of unearthing the nascent patterns and compulsions and metaphors within the play's evolving narrative and premise, and determining which one would best support and liberate the artefact-in-the-making. This endeavour occurred throughout the initial research and writing stages, and continued throughout the writing of the first draft as I explored the efficacy of three over-arching structures.

The first structure I explored emerged from the fact that Sophia, like her father's homeland Palestine, was an occupied territory. That is, Sophia is (pre)occupied by external forces and struggling to achieve self-determination under the weight of conflict and contested history. With this in mind, I began to construct early scenes in layers to see if I could embed this concept in the form of the play. I would put different events from different points along the play's thirty-year time span into one multi-layered scene. As I wrote, I read that Cixous had grown up in French-occupied Algeria, always aware of the Arabic voices at the back of the classroom, the Algerian bones beneath triumphalist monuments, and the "cut-off signs" that always meant "Jew" (Cixous 2009); I began to notice that, dramaturgically, occupation created a type of whispering or linguistic associating at the layers' edges and peripheries. However, as an overarching structure, occupation was a dead weight, a compacting downward force which prevented me from advancing the first draft beyond the arrival of Aunt Azza (scene 14). Thus, my initial method of departure had created a burden from which Sophia, and my creative self, could never escape.

As I read about Palestine, and the work of Palestinian peace negotiator Hanan Ashrawi, I began to explore a second structure based on the formal and sequential stages of an international peace process. Given Sophia's desire for reconciliation and self-determination, and her need for a settlement akin to a "two-state solution", I initially thought that such a structure would well serve the play's conceptual basis and narrative arcs. However, this structure was problematic because it proved to be an imposition upon the emergent play, a fascination based on an intellectual engagement with the

content, rather than a careful listening to those whispers and associations at the edge of my awareness. The linear structure was also self-consciously political, which had the effect of turning each scene containing Aunt Azza into an over-earnest dead zone. It was a good idea for a different play, but it was not appropriate for the project at hand.

The third structure I explored grew out of the multi-layering of scenes that I had been writing while exploring the notion of occupation. As I researched archaeology - Sophia's would-be profession - I noted a parallel between the multi-layered scenes, and the phenomenon of stratification, the layers of occupation or chronological events within an archaeological dig site. However, it was the idea of a disturbed dig site which grabbed my imagination. Dramaturgically, a play structured like a disturbed dig site had the potential to interrupt linear and historical time, and therefore the fixity of dramatic realism, and to support layers of narrative which had been fragmented or taken out of context. This felt right for the play because military occupation, murder, and migration continued to disturb the relationships within Sophia's family by way of grief, deceit, resentment, revenge or guilt. Such a structure could associatively or randomly link narrative fragments and arrange them into a new complexity. It could embody Sophia's conflicted experience, but also offer her, and the audience, a way to dig, sift, sort and sequence the fragments of her narrative, eventually making healing sense of the whole.

This avenue of inquiry led me to discover a structure for *Jump for Jordan* which emerged from, and embodied, its content. It was a structure based on disturbing the thirty-year chronology of the cross-generational narrative, and combining multiple temporalities in the same scene, which, in effect, turned the entire play into a field of disturbance in need of remediation. Moreover, what emerged at the intersection of fragmented narrative layers was a type of whispering or linguistic playfulness which opened up an unexpected but vital aesthetic and dramaturgical direction.

LANGUAGE

To write *Jump for Jordan*, I had to construct a plausible narrative which spanned three countries, two generations, and two languages. As I entwined the story fragments -

which numbered up to one hundred in one draft - I had to ensure that an audience would be able to track and connect events, and recognise key plot points. I therefore constructed the story strands according to conventional cause and effect plotting. That is, it would be possible to rearrange them into a chronological timeline. This offered an audience a credible overarching narrative, and the chance to leave the theatre with a satisfying sense of the protagonist's dramatic arc. Additionally, I made sure that each individual story fragment had its own dramatic integrity. Each one provides exposition, respects "the laws of physics" (Haring-Smith 2003, 48) - unless it is a fantasy or dream scene - and works to serve the narrative and emotional arc of the protagonist. The vocabulary and syntax are "determined by biographical 'facts' such as class or ethnicity" (Castagno 2001, 17), and the dialogue reveals each character through plausible actions which explain their thoughts and feelings (Haring-Smith 2003, 47). Since characters other than Avenging Azza generally "conform to the rules of modern psychology" (Haring-Smith 2003, 46) by displaying a consistency of intention, and the marks and scars of their backstory, each individual fragment is comprised of both a text and a subtext (Haring-Smith 2003, 46). However, the logical causality of conventional dramatic writing was not to be the sole or primary framework for this creative work.

Oblique conversations

The following excerpt is from scene one. In this scene, I plaited together three scenes about Sophia's transgressive act of running away from home unmarried: in the present, Sophia is choosing clothes to wear while anticipating the disapproval of Aunt Azza; in the past, Loren yells at Sophia for having run away; in a more distant past, Mara yells at Loren on the day she discovers Sophia is gone. The excerpt is from the end of the scene.

LOREN Drama queen!

MARA How could she do this?

LOREN Run away at twenty-one! Shit Sophia, no one does that.

MARA Books in a taxi! Bras in the gutter! Neighbours saw everything!

SAM Sophie.

SOPHIE What?

MARA You stupid

LOREN impulsive

MARA unmarried

LOREN brat!

As I entwined dialogue from the story fragments, I became aware of the emergence of different linguistic capacity which depended on dramaturgical context. For example, in the above excerpt, when Mara says, “How could she do this?”, her line is followed by one from Loren, “Run away at twenty-one!”. Loren’s line is delivered to Sophia in a chronologically later event, but it also explains that Mara is referring to Sophia’s act of running away from home. As such, the line has a double capacity to function within the course of its own narrative, *and* outside of it. That is, it can function denotatively and by association at the same time. It can respond to more than one cue, making meaning in more than one direction and in more than one way. It can be part of more than one conversation at once.

Associative logic (Connection beyond categories)

As I wrote, I then sought to make the dialogue perform two functions simultaneously: being referential within the course of a scene, and working associatively across scenes. For example, in scene 16, mention of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas precedes the memory of Sahir who says, “But Sophia Loren emerged from the rubble”. Sahir then walks into scene 17 explaining how he found refuge in Sophia Loren’s escapist

films, and then into scene 18 where we realise that what he needed to escape from was Mara's temper. The image of Mara yelling remains like an afterglow as, in scene 19, Sophia enters telling Sam that she is fed with up being yelled at by her mother. By the end of scene 19, Sophia and Sam's first kiss is interrupted by Loren in scene 20 who, by contrast, utters the romantically dead word "concrete" before failing to convince her family that she loves her fiancé Frank. The scenes in this sequence begin and end in the present, and encompass events from memory, the recent past, and the less recent past. On one hand, they illustrate the play's disturbed dig site structure by collapsing memories from different times in on the present. On the other hand, the opposite of collapse is taking place; as images resonate and transform from scene to scene, as they are carried forward like a chameleon or shape-shifter, they construct an "associative web of meaning" (Haring-Smith 2003, 48) which, in lieu of a linear plot, provides an organising principle for the play as a whole.

That the language in *Jump for Jordan* came to resonate beyond the limits of its sentence, scene, narrative, and denotation, reminded me that Benmussa's sphere of disturbance was not simply intended to oppose and escape "stagnant categories" (Benmussa 1979, 21); it was also intended to "liberate poetic expression" and enable impressions to "escape from their original meaning" (Benmussa 1979, 20-21). As I wrote *Jump for Jordan*, poetic liberation certainly occurred as I attended to an associative aliveness that seemed to wait at the edges or intersections of lines and scenes. Once linear and historical time was interrupted or side-stepped, an impetus emerged which compelled words to respond to the flow of language and situation (Castagno 2001, 13). Not only could language exercise an awareness beyond the course of its narrative or the ken of its character, it could playfully and purposefully create a coherent associative logic, becoming a dominant force in the shaping of the play.

Associative causality (activation across borders)

To associate is to connect. Association connects things in a way which is not rational, but is not irrational either. Connection is made by perceiving stimulii which, in a play, as in a dream, could be an image, symbol, metaphor, theme, connotation, emotional

beat, similarity or contradiction. It could also be a desire: in Benmussa's reflection on the production of *Portrait of Dora*, she equates the stage work with dream work, and describes both as "the meeting place of desire" (Benmussa 1979, 9). She explains how a single production detail could "concentrate a desire very powerfully" and create around it "a nebulous zone which allows the spectator to divine the other, distant, obscure, ever-widening circles in which other desires are lying in wait" (Benmussa 1979, 9). As I wrote *Jump for Jordan*, I too was able to divine desires "lying in wait"; desires or fears or needs belonging to Sophia which could respond to a remark, provide an emotional beat, and trigger a transition of scene or character. For example, in scene 8, Mara's threatening question, "Remember in Jordan when a man in the traffic was rude to Azza?", triggers the entrance of Avenging Azza who boasts about delivering disciplinary beatings; in scene 10, Sahir's entrance on the line, "The Jordan depression is a unique geographical feature", is triggered by Sophia's depressing experience of being berated by Loren; in scene 33, Sam and Sahir's amicable meeting in an outback roadhouse appears after Young Sahir prays for peace for his children-to-be.

By crafting language with an awareness of the power of association, I seem to have opened a dramaturgical door to associative causality whereby a tacit desire or need in the protagonist could trigger an event and became a dominant force in shaping the play, particularly, the sequence of action. This built "interruption and juxtaposition, not coherence, into the fabric of the play" (Castagno 2001, 83). According to Castagno, interrupting linearity trains an audience to let go of their presumptions and expectations (Castagno 2001, 83). Using this approach to structure scenes, and relationships between scenes, would therefore assist my project aims, and in particular, add a highly flexible theatrical strategy to my dramaturgical toolkit.

PSYCHIC SPACE

When I began writing *Jump for Jordan*, I began by layering scenes from Sophia's past and present. Sophia has a present tense through-line which chronologically takes her from Aunt Azza's arrival to a time, perhaps six months later, when she is learning Arabic, and living with Sam and Loren. The layers disturbing this dig site were to be

fragments of a backstory distributed across two generations and thirty years. However, as mentioned, as the layers crossed, I could discern the workings of an associative impetus and connective tissue which allowed language to function directly and obliquely, and escape a simple signifying narrative course. Significantly, Sophia's subjectivity acquired the same capacity. Like a dreamer, like Dora in Cixous's play *Portrait of Dora*, Sophia became able to perceive directly and obliquely.[39] For example, in scene one, two past events crash in on Sophia's present. However, rather than simply exist as parallel action, "it is as if she is thinking" (Benmussa 1979, 16) Loren and Mara, as if she is able to activate their presence with her mind, while also being present with Sam. The emergence of Sophia's oblique and direct awareness had the effect of turning mere dramatisations of past events into living memories interacting with her present. As such, like language in this play, the protagonist could escape her narrative stream, and the laws of dramatic realism. She became a subject with an active psyche who could inhabit multiple layers of her consciousness at once, and therefore associatively trigger non-realist story fragments such as fantasies, dreams, and conversations with the dead.

I will expand upon this point by returning to three previous examples. In scene 8, Mara's threatening question, "Remember in Jordan when a man in the traffic was rude to Azza?", triggers the entrance of Avenging Azza who promptly threatens Sophia by boasting about disciplinary beatings. Far from being a "real" character, Avenging Azza is an absurd fantasy, an embodiment of Sophia's internalised racism triggered by her fear of family retribution. In scene 10, Sahir's entrance on the line, "The Jordan depression is a unique geographical feature", is triggered by Sophia's experience of being berated by Loren. Throughout the play, the entrances of Sophia's dead father respond to Sophia's need for consolation and encouragement. Her conversations with him might be remembered, invented or both, but more importantly, they sustain Sahir's prayer for family peace which gains a foothold in the final scene. In scene 33, Sam and Sahir meet in an outback roadhouse. Sahir is dead, Sam is absent and out of range, and the two never actually met. In rehearsal, this scene was thought to combine too many

[39] Dora was Sigmund Freud's first case study. In Cixous' play, she rebels against the patriarchal limitations placed upon her and her desire.

non-realities, and push the boundaries of plausibility a little too far, and I was urged to cut it. However, I knew that the scene was necessitated by the play - it was a psychic invention even more outrageous than Avenging Azza, but it was a dream triggered by Sophia's desire for reconciliation and acceptance. It was a plausible preoccupation of Sophia's mind, a symbol of her deepest hope, and a healing juncture in her narrative arc.

A physics of dreams

In *Jump for Jordan*, non-realist characters and story fragments are triggered and supported by "associative webs of meaning" (Haring-Smith 2003, 48) in Sophia's psyche, and in the language-driven register of the play. The physics of dramatic realism exists in the present tense through-line, but it is no more important than the "physics of dreams" (Hating-Smith 2003, 48) which permits Sophia's psyche, and the play's language, to side-step cause and effect, and cross the borders of time, space and consciousness. It is differently active and affective, and disposed to evolving the form of the play.

As I reflect on the emergence of the "physics of dreams" in *Jump for Jordan*, I recall that, in her autobiographical book *So Close* (2009), Cixous wrote about being able to cross, without difficulty, with the naturalness she has in dreams, through a "translucid portal" while reading a book by Balzac. The term "translucid portal" is a description which resonates well with the porous borders in *Jump for Jordan*. It describes an open passage between rational logic and dream logic, and between inner and outer experience It also proffers both meanings of the word "lucid": to express clearly or understand easily, and, as in the case of a dreamer, to be aware of dreaming and able to control events. Sophia's life and psyche form the playground for this play, so she is cognisant of every scene. However, in scene 34, when she refuses to be abducted by Avenging Azza into an arranged marriage, Sophia steps into the role of lucid dreamer. She takes control of a dreamed event, and thereby exercises an agency which frees her from the engendering and racist concepts which have plagued her up until that point.

Dreams and comedy

Significantly for this creative project, I was to discover that the mechanism of association that pertains to dreams also pertains to comedy (Charney 1978, 154). It is the mechanism which allows both a dreamer and a comic hero to make intuitive leaps of logic which are "symbolically self-contained and self-consistent" (Charney 1978, 154), and which are "generated by a train of thought which expresses important preoccupations" (Charney 1978, 154). Maurice Charney states that, in comedy:

> As in dreams, the facts are thoroughly transformed by distortion, overemphasis, imaginary dialogue, wordplay, incongruity, and other personalizing devices, so that the imagined reality has little resemblance to the reality with which we began. To put it simply, the objective reality is fundamentally changed by the churning and turbulent processes of wish fulfilment and fantasy gratification. (Charney 1978, 155)

As I wrote the first draft of *Jump for Jordan*, I was able to transform and distort Sophia's reality, and give form to her "churning and turbulent" desires and fears, dreams and fantasies. However, my identification with Sophia's psychic and family turmoil, especially the ructions created by generational trauma, and unexpressed grief for Layla, kept me from seeing the humour I had built into the play's language and structure.

DISTURBANCE

Many of the strategies written about in the previous section, Excavation, were developed intuitively. They were discovered in the act of writing, understood in hindsight, and given greater freedom in the writing of the second and subsequent drafts. The generative writing required by the first draft involved an intricate interweaving which rendered the pace of progress incremental. It took the fun out of the fabulation, and routinely made me lose grip on the play's coherence and bigger picture. In addition to this painstaking process, my identification with the play's themes of grief and trauma, and my need and determination to "undo the work of death" (Cixous 1976, 883), often made me lose creative traction, and my sense of humour, and veer into wrong directions or dead ends. In this section, I discuss the disturbance created by the aspects of my practice which led me to lose critical distance, and to complete a first draft which was veering towards a tragic, not comic, mode. This linear and formal account may create the impression that the process of writing *Jump for Jordan* was orderly and impartial when the opposite was in fact the case.

THE EMOTIONAL EPICENTRE

The murder of the character of Layla, in Palestine, before Sophia and Loren were born, is the emotional epicentre of the play. It is the tremor which irrevocably disturbed this site by creating the need for Sahir to flee and Mara to migrate, and the circumstances which displaced their love with grief and resentment. That Layla's death is unmentioned and unmourned only serves to keep this painful past present. As I wrote, and as non-realist dream or fantasy spaces became possible, I considered giving form to Layla's emotional presence, either by bringing her on stage, or by activating a psychic space in which the living and perhaps the dead could ritually meet and speak and begin to heal. As such, I was looking for a way to activate "a sphere of doing for the purpose of 'undoing'" (Aston 1999, 18); that is, a dramaturgical strategy which could cross the borders of time, space and consciousness in order to undo the damage that had been done to two generations of the one family.

I knew that Layla, if she were to be present in the play, would not be a ghost. Sahir, the other dead character in the play, is not a ghost either. As his Arabic name signifies, he is "wakeful", one who stays up late caring for others, consoling and encouraging Sophia until she can manage on her own. He is remembered or imagined, and Layla too, if she were to appear, would have to do so as an unrepressed memory made possible by a psychic need or shift. I knew that scene 36, in which Sophia receives the Nakba key from Aunt Azza, would be the most likely place for Layla to appear; and that this scene would need to open closures, and invite in exiled feelings and memories. As Sophia and Aunt Azza do not have a common language, I knew that I needed a translator or translation mechanism, and wondered if Layla could somehow serve this function. In the course of this research, I found two dramaturgical strategies which offered models for what I was trying to achieve: one was a "death space" used by Caryl Churchill; the other was the "dramaturgies of disinterment" used by Suzan-Lori Parks.

DEATH SPACE

Fen by English playwright Caryl Churchill premiered in 1983. It is a play which represents the economic exploitation of labourers working in the East Anglian fens. In scene 21, the final scene, Val's lover Frank reluctantly agrees to her request, kills her with an axe, and stuffs her into a wardrobe. However, as Elin Diamond notes, "Val re-emerges not as a prophetic ghost of misty mystified body but as a consciousness that instantiates a new theatre space" (Diamond 1992, 271). That is, Churchill raises Val from the dead and gives her a heightened awareness in which she can hear the stories of the dead and dreaming, and make space "for her fellow labourers to explore and change their suffering" (Diamond 1992, 271). Diamond alludes to Cixous when she likens their appearance in Val's "death space" to "the return of the repressed" who become aware of the conditions that have stifled their "unheard songs" (Diamond 1992, 272). She notes that, for a time, this "death space" reinvests their bodies "with stories, secrets, and mythic powers", and attempts to correct the violent repression which has disciplined them into silence (Diamond 1992, 273).

By examining the "death space" in the final scene of *Fen* I discovered a way in which I might extend the frame of *Jump for Jordan* beyond Sophia's subjectivity by including a scene in which her oblique or heightened awareness was available to the other characters, living and dead. Such a bolder crossing of the time, space and consciousness borders in the play could allow the unspeakable to be heard. It could also potentially reinvest Layla, Sahir, Mara and Azza with the idealism, hope and love of their youth, and bequeath a renewed legacy to Sophia and Loren.

DRAMATURGIES OF DISINTERMENT

Venus by African-American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks debuted in 1996 during the struggle to repatriate the remains of Saartjie Baartman, a Khoisan woman from South Africa. Baartman had been taken to Europe in 1810 and exhibited as a human curiosity called 'The Hottentot Venus' until her death in 1816. In her article, "Suzan-Lori Park's Drama of Disinterment: A Transnational Exploration of 'Venus'" (2008), Sara L. Warner states that:

> Baartman was denied dignity in life and in death by the dehumanizing effects of scientific racism and colonial discourses that equated blackness with bestiality, monstrosity, and savagery, and women of color with unbridled, exotic sexuality (Warner 2008, 191).

Acts of interment, Warner argues, enact "ritualised performances" designed to heal wounds, remember, mourn, and move on (Warner 2008, 188). They institutionalise an official account of the truth, and turn closure into foreclosure (Warner 2008, 190) for the sake of political unity. However, dramas of disinterment, as employed by Parks, destabilise closed structures, and "insist upon a never-ending opening" (Warner 2008, 195).

The dramaturgy in *Fen* reinvests the labourers' bodies with stories, a strategy which attempts to correct the violent repression which has disciplined them into silence (Diamond 1992, 273); similarly, the dramaturgy in *Venus* reinvests Baartman with

stories which contest her dehumanising history, and reject efforts to put her to rest. It grants Baartman an "aesthetic resurrection" (Warner 2008, 199) which unearths the past, thwarts catharsis, disorders accepted truth (Warner 2008, 189), and provides no adjudication or narrative coherence and closure (Warner 2008, 199). The dramaturgy "revives and sustains" Baartman, and enables a different story to be told, one "not rooted in either victimization or transcendence" (Warner 2008, 199).

The "aesthetic resurrection" employed in *Venus* is an audacious riposte to colonialism. It disinters the Other from the fabrications and closures of history, and raises from the dead a former victim who is neither conciliatory nor grateful. As a concept, it offered a dynamic of unearthing which was possibly applicable to both the Layla subplot and to the collapsed dig site structure. However, Parks' skilfully acerbic characterisation and surreal stylistic assault on hegemonic oppression were not. The characters in *Jump for Jordan* required a dramaturgical crossing that would not add trauma to trauma; and the play's climax required a less extreme performance register which would not alienate the audience at the point when empathic connection had been earned.

Eventually, I decided that Layla's absence was an important force in the play, and that giving her a literal presence would only diminish her potency. Nevertheless, this research avenue revealed how I might continue to extend my border-crossing aesthetic, confirmed the efficacy of finding ways for a play's dramaturgy to do half of the required work, and nourished my awe of the transcendent potential of theatrical form, especially in the hands of playwrights such as Churchill and Parks. However, it also signalled the fact that, before I could instantiate a new theatre space (Diamond 1992, 271) for the dead, I first had to attend to a need to mourn their loss.

A LITANY OF LOSS

In *Jump for Jordan*, I had to give expression to a great deal of pain and loss: Mara's loss of her homeland, language and social status; Sophia's experience of being ashamed and disowned; Loren's desperation to escape her mother by marrying a man she does not love; Sahir and Azza's unexpressed grief for Layla; Sahir's post-traumatic psychic

numbness; and Sam's feeling of negation. Also, I had to reveal the cause of Layla's death, and my research into the murder of Juliano Mer Kermis, which informed this subplot, as well into dramaturgical death spaces and disinterments, required sombre contemplation. In addition, *Jump for Jordan* is a diasporic story mired in the fallout of displacement and migration, resettlement and resentment, trauma and denial - issues which had attracted me to this narrative, but which also chimed painfully with my own family history.

From the inside, the landscape of this play was very dark. The losses and pain in the narrative, the death-focused research, and the de-energised incrementally slow first draft writing process combined to overwhelm me with the themes of grief and death. I began to fixate on the idea that the play needed to break bread with the dead (Abela 2010-2014, 24 October 2010) by creating at its climax a deliberate "ritual holding" (Abela 2010-2014, 26 October 2010) in which grief for Layla could finally find expression. I also began to be curious about the fact that, unlike the other characters, the seeds for the character of Layla had not originated in my friend's story. While I had to invent an incident which gave Sahir cause to flee, did I really need to invent a character whose death was premature and unmourned?

By keeping a journal of my creative process, I came to realise that the landscape of this play was not only dark, it was also close to home. I remembered that an unmourned and premature death had been a recurring motif in all of my full length self-initiated plays (Abela 2010-2014, 14 November 2013),[40] and that "in my plays, the dead aren't dead" (Abela 2010-2014, 30 November 2012). I also reflected upon the fact that I was either unable to finish these plays, or had only managed to finish them under the duress of a non-negotiable deadline and a confronting creative process. I eventually made the connection between this recurring motif and the death of my younger brother Richard who died in 1965 when I was 16 months old. He was never spoken about, does not appear in family photographs, and has no headstone on his grave; I could finally see that my unconscious need to acknowledge his life and lament his death had infused my body

[40] *A Summer Reign* (unfinished), *The Daphne Massacre* (2003), *Merla's Furnace* (unfinished), *The Rood Screen* (2006).

of work for many years. If I were to complete *Jump for Jordan*, I had to do the inner work required to untangle my personal needs and narrative from the creative process, and cultivate a different perspective in order to rise above my identification with the characters' pain and grief. Therapy and Focusing were invaluable in this regard.[41] However, another impediment was also contributing to the litany of loss.

UNDOING THE WORK OF DEATH

In their essay "Decapitation or Castration?" Cixous and Kuhn write at length about the oppositional masculine and feminine couple which is "engaged in a kind of war in which death is always at work" (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 44). They recount a story by the Chinese general and philosopher Sun Tzu, and as a metaphorical thinker, I found this way of illustrating death's work within the structural arrangement of binary logic both helpful and haunting.

In the story, a General orders a King's one hundred and eighty wives to stand in line behind the King's two favourites. He is turning them into soldiers, teaching them "the code", and ordering them to march to "the language of the drumbeat" (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 42):

> But instead of learning the code very quickly, the ladies started laughing and chattering and paying no attention to the lesson, and Sun Tse (sic), the master, repeated the lesson several times over. But the more he spoke, the more the women fell about laughing. (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 42)

When the King hears of his wives' insubordination, he acts in accordance with the law. He declares their actions mutinous, and orders his two favourite wives to be beheaded.

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[41] Focusing is a practice developed from the Philosophy of the Implicit in which open attention is applied to something that is implicitly felt in the body before it is explicitly known or put into words. Creating space for a bodily-felt sense allows a fresh awareness of a whole situation to form, and creates a step towards resolution or new possibilities. Focusing was developed by Gene Gendlin and colleagues at the University of Chicago, and is supported by a long series of operational research studies (The Focusing Institute 2016). I began my Focusing training in 2008 under the guidance of Jane Quayle, and am working towards becoming a certified Focusing trainer.

The training resumes, “and as if they had never done anything except practice the art of war, the women turned right, left, and about in silence and with never a single mistake” (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 42).

This grim story came to encapsulate my theoretical and experiential understanding of the silencing violence at work within the binary structural arrangement. When the wives laugh off the King’s “great imposture” (Cixous 1986), they are rejecting the norm of the subordinate feminine, acting in accordance with their own desires, and exercising their own sovereignty. The same desire motivates Sophia when she runs away from home. However, since binary logic locks the feminine and masculine into a “radical dependency” (Butler 2008, xxx), feminine self-determination and transgression are an intolerable affront to masculine centrality and significance. They provoke a backlash based on “castration anxiety” (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 43) which results in the violation of the integrity of the feminine body. Whether physical, as in the case of the two favourite wives, or social and psychic, as in the case of the surviving wives, the effect is the same - the “loss of her head” (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 43). Like the labourers in all but the last scene in *Fen*, violent repression has “disciplined them into silence” (Diamond 1992, 273).

For the purposes of this research project, I spent a great deal of time clarifying what feminisms opposed and disturbed. I became mired in the feminist discourses that articulated the “long history of gynocide” (Cixous 1976, 888) because, like my fixation with grief and death, the topic was close to home. As a female artist, my struggle to escape the “mundane violence” (Butler 2008, xxi) of my socialisation, and speak in my own voice, had been life long; and so, as a feminist artist, my need to be “the enemy of death” (Cixous 1991, 25) was personal and total. Therefore, alongside my attempt to lament Richard through Layla, was my attempt to liberate myself by inscribing female and marginalised subjects with centrality and agency. The compulsion to mourn, the struggle to exist in cultural space, and my identification with my characters’ pain and loss, consequently kept the anguish within *Jump for Jordan* on the front foot, which resulted in a first draft which tended towards the tragic mode.

THE WRONG MODE

> Two weeks ago Lee Lewis said I had written a joyous comedy. Yesterday Cath McKinnon said I had written a black comedy. OMG. How amazing. How valuable. How interesting. from the inside it has been so bleak. now I can go lightly and have overt fun - like my plays used to do. This morning rewrote a scene and it is now far funnier, now that I know I have a comedy on my hands.
>
> (Abela 2010-2014, 6 March 2012)

Theatre director Lee Lewis, and my doctoral supervisor Dr Cath McKinnon, were the first assessors to provide comment on *Jump for Jordan*'s first full draft. Independently, unequivocally, and despite a bleak ending, they both identified the play's mode as comedy, and the play's promise as one of triumph over adversity. Their feedback was a revelation about the play, and about my practice. Initially, I thought, *how could all this obsession and suffering be funny? And actually, how dare anyone laugh!* This, I would realise, was because I had been

> too respectful and reverent, too closely identified, too much the good girl, the guardian of the people in pain that others have overlooked. i think i felt it wasn't appropriate to laugh at these people because they have suffered enough.
>
> (Abela 2010-2014, 18 March 2012)

This attitude and sense of duty had steered me, uncritically, towards the tragic mode, and the response of Lewis and McKinnon, as well as being a relief, gave me pause to reflect more broadly upon this mode's workings. Given that I had failed see the extent of the comic capacity in my own creative work, it was not difficult to agree with Diana Taylor who describes tragedy as a genre which produces "percepticide", or "a form of killing or numbing through the senses" (Taylor quoted in Warner 2008, 196-7). Taylor states that tragedy cuts catastrophes down to size, into ordered and comprehensible events which blind us "to other ways of thinking about them"; this blindness ultimately works "against broader emancipatory politics because it detaches events refusing to see connections and larger frameworks" (Warner citing Taylor in Warner 2008, 196-7).

By imagining my story in a tragic mode, I had become blind to the "connections", "larger frameworks", and comic potential, at work in my own play; I was settling for a form which would compel an audience to deliver customary and dutiful feelings such as "sympathy and horror" which are designed to purge and liberate (Warner 2008, 196-97); contrary to the goals of this creative project, I was opting into a genre which "presupposes a formed world" (Dürrenmatt 1958, 30). I had worked to oppose and disturb the epistemologically fixed universe of patriarchal arrangements, however, these actions had served to reinforce this formed world, and its dominant position as a central and everlasting reference point.

ARRIVING ON THE SCENE

> Playwrights can come from most difficult circumstances, but having a sense of humour is what happens when you "get out of the way." It's sorta Zen. Laughter is very powerful - it's not a way of escaping anything but a way of arriving on the scene. (Parks 1995, 15)

In *Venus*, the innovation in Parks' aesthetic resurrection of Saartjie Baartman was her decision to replay colonial history not as lamentable tragedy, but as farce (Warner 2008, 197). Whereas I had written the first draft of *Jump for Jordan* from an empathetic base, identifying with my characters as victims of difficult circumstances, Park's farce "contaminates and implicates" (Warner 2008, 196) her audience in an absurd saga which refuses to victimise Baartman or to explain or resolve the issue of her brutalisation. Instead of catharsis, Parks had aimed to elicit convulsions of laughter which "produce a different experience of embodiment and very different field of vision" (Warner 2008, 196). While the dramaturgical strategies Parks employed in *Venus* amount to a provocation incompatible with the aims of my creative project, it was this play's illustration of laughter's power to overcome blindness or fixed perceptions which helped me to understand that, by forsaking my sense of humour, I had also lost much from my practice: aesthetic vision, critical distance, theatrical nous, psychological and creative agility, and a joyful aliveness from which to write. I had also, in the words

of comedy theorist Henri Bergson, endangered “all that was laughable” (Bergson 1935, chapter 3) in my play.

By focusing on loss, and tending towards the tragic mode, I had collaborated with structures which fated my negation. Theoretically, I stood shoulder to shoulder with Sun Tsu’s decapitated wives, trapped in their closed and foreclosed narrative, instead of activating a new narrative in which the unforeseeable could be foreseen (Cixous 1976, 875). As a feminist practitioner, having contemplated this “act of death” (Cixous 1986, 342), it was now time to take up “the challenge of loss in order to go on living” (Cixous 1976, 888). That is, it was time to swap tears for an outbreak of endless laughter imbued with the strength to put patriarchal arrangements into perspective (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 55) and the power to break up hegemonic “truth” (Cixous 1976, 888). For, in the non-inclusive words of playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt:

> In laughter man's freedom becomes manifest, in crying his necessity. Our task today is to demonstrate freedom. (Dürrenmatt 1958, 36)

ARTEFACT

THE COMIC MODE

This practice-led research enabled me to discover that *Jump for Jordan* was a comedy-in-waiting. However, in order to activate the play's under-performing comic devices and tropes, and leave the tragic mode behind, the second and subsequent drafts needed to be informed by a study of comedy's mechanics, and by a reminder that, as a feminist practitioner, I was crafting a cultural intervention that was an "artificial construct" (Ecker 1985, 18). Being led by language and association, intuition and a felt sense, had enabled me to create a first draft which was on the way to achieving the aims of my creative project. However, it was time to stand at the playwright's forge and strategically and consciously fashion the chassis for this vehicle of imaginative travel.

To research the comic mode, I turned to a number of key works including: *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* by Henri Bergson (1935), *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* by Northrope Frye (1967), *Comedy High and Low: Introduction to the Experience of Comedy* by M. Charney (1978) and *Comedy: An Introduction to Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema* by T. G. A. Nelson (1990). As my research veered towards ironic, dark and black comedy, I found two works in particular to be invaluable: *The Dark Comedy: The Development of the Modern Comic Tragedy* by J. L. Styan (1968), and S. Connard's MA Thesis *The Comedic Basis of Black Comedy: An Analysis of Black Comedy as a Unique Contemporary Film Genre* (2005). While comedy has been employed by many female playwrights - Suzan-Lori Parks, Megan Terry, Adrienne Kennedy, Caryl Churchill, for example - and is referred to in critical essays about individual plays and performances, I was not able to find feminist writers who had interrogated these male-authored texts about comedy. I was therefore aware that this aspect of my research lacked female voices and perspectives, and that, as a feminist reader, I might find myself "reading against the text" in order to discern any alliance with the biases of patriarchal production (Case 1993, 19).

THE COMIC SPIRIT

Despite the above mentioned caveat, and a wariness about the fact that comedy is "a highly formal and conventional art" (Charney 1978, 95), from the moment I began to research comedy, I knew that I had found the right mode for my creative project. In contradistinction to the death-dealing mechanisms within the patriarchal Symbolic, and the anti-emancipatory structure of tragedy, comic theory posits that comedy asserts and safeguards the principles of life. While comic narratives span a spectrum from festive and romantic on the one hand, to ironic, dark and black on the other, and might or might not reinforce the hegemonic status quo, I recognised my abiding aesthetic affinity with the comic spirit which, according to Bergson, is a "living thing", a "living energy" and an "expansive force" (Bergson 1935, chapter 1). Bergson states:

> ... we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing. However trivial it may be, we shall treat it with the respect due to life. (Bergson 1935, chapter 1)

This unquantifiable ebullience which, as Bergson notes, deserves our utmost respect, harks back to comedy's likely etymological origins of kõma (sleep), kõme (country village or village song) and kõmos (revel or festival) (Segal 2001, 1-4). These human experiences carry intimations of night, dreams, eroticism, indulgence, excess and transgression, and "offer opportunities for untrammelled freedom" (Segal 2001, 9), for in comedy, particularly festive comedy, freedom is the driving force. Characters, for example, may vanquish obstacles (Charney 1978, 135), invert the social order (Nelson 1990, 171), or free themselves from a cruel law (Bergson 1935, chapter 1) or from the clutches of parasites and impostors (Frye 1967, 172). Plots, for example, generally move "from law to liberty" (Frye 1967, 181), from bondage or intolerability or illusion to a new "social centre" (Frye 1967, 166) that is desirable and real (Frye 1967, 166). The plots crystallise around a reintegrated hero (Frye 1967, 163) who Charney describes as "the patron of everything real, physical, material, enjoyable, and the enemy of all abstractions, moral principles, seriousness, and joylessness" (Charney 1978, 160-61). In other words, the comic hero's basic allegiance is to nothing less than "the life force" itself (Charney 1978, 160-61).

When Judith Butler wrote *Gender Trouble*, she worked "from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such (Butler 2008, xxi). As I wrote the second draft of *Jump for Jordan*, I likewise understood this project to be a life-affirming enterprise, one which possessed a comic spirit which had animated many of my previous plays. As a practitioner, I experienced this comic spirit as "a living thing" (Bergson 1935, chap 1), as a playful resilience that I could muster if I worked lightly and quickly from a sense of adventure and joy, rather than pain or obligation. I experienced it as an assertion of freedom and courageous advance that was intrinsically at odds with a retreat response. I heartily welcomed this vitalising sensibility into the second and subsequent drafts of *Jump for Jordan*, and regretted that I had mistakenly repressed and forsaken it in the first.[42] I could now work from Butler's "desire to live", leave behind my hampering victim-identification, fashion characters from an external and theatrical base, and think more strategically about form. Had I managed to keep *Jump for Jordan* within the tragic mode, I may well have written the kind of melodrama that Frye calls "a comedy without humour" (Frye 1967, 40), the kind that is tangled up in its own pity (Frye 1967, 47), and rightfully earns the derision of its harangued audience (Styan 1968, 267). Fortunately, by liberating *Jump for Jordan*'s comic spirit, I was able write a play which, in production, was regularly described as "joyous" and "hilarious" (Simmonds 2014), and prompted one reviewer to write "I challenge anyone not to enjoy 'Jump for Jordan'" (Simmons 2014).

THE FRAME OF PLAY

Unlike tragedy, which "presupposes a formed world", comedy "supposes an unformed world, a world being made and turned upside down" (Dürrenmatt 1958, 30). It forms what is formless, and creates "order out of chaos" (Dürrenmatt 1958, 30). With its comic spirit, and its freedom-driven trajectory, comedy employs a frame of play, a

[42] In 2006, my play *The Rood Screen* had been produced at the Darlinghurst Theatre. Its absurd and ironic comic form was misunderstood by both the director and the critics. The mis-direction of my work, and the subsequent bad reviews, were such that I decided to stop writing plays. When I did return to playwrighting a few years later, I wanted to avoid a similar experience, and so consciously curtailed the absurd and ironic tendencies in my work.

"zone of artifice" (Bergson 1935, chapter 1) in which audiences know to temporarily and voluntarily suspend disbelief "for purposes of the fiction" (Charney 1978, 77). Within this frame of play, audiences also know that detachment and comic distance will typify their relationship with the characters. Rather than empathise with characters (Charney 1978, 77), they will externally observe them (Frye 1967, 39), and be able to separate from an event in order to laugh at it (Connard 2005, 56). In this way, comedy serves the feminist practitioner well because its frame of play "appeals to the intelligence, pure and simple" (Bergson 1935, chap 3), and at the dark and black end of the comic spectrum, "audience enlightenment" actually becomes a "defining characteristic" (Connard 2005, 20).

Crafting *Jump for Jordan* within a frame of play precipitated a liberating attitudinal shift in my practice. It allowed me to down the heavy feminist tools of opposition and disturbance, and take up the creative tool of activation with a sense of lightness and agility. It enabled me to swap the noun "play" for the verb "play", and activate an appropriate "sphere of doing for the purposes of undoing" (Aston 1999, 18), a holistic field of artifice and fun which contracted me and the audience to relinquish the precepts of realism and embrace a temporary fiction in which the principles and impetus of this project could thrive. With this new distance and perspective, I was able to overcome the wrong-headed aspects of my practice, and reclaim a shunned affinity for ironic and dark comedy. I could write characters with greater verve and boldness, and more easily explore the potential of divergent, ridiculous or seemingly impossible ideas and scenarios. I could leave behind my period of mourning and get on with the business of making "life possible" (Butler 2008, xxi).

COMIC TROPES AND STOCK CHARACTERS

In order to shift *Jump for Jordan* from the tragic to the comic mode, research into the "remarkably tenacious" (Frye 1967, 163) tropes and stock characters of Western comedy was also required. This research avenue was extensive, but for the purposes of this exegesis, the alazon and eiron character types, and the tropes of the cruel law and

ritual bondage, will be highlighted, as these relate to pivotal aspects of *Jump for Jordan*'s narrative.

Before I conducted my research into comedy, my attitude towards Mara and Sophia was empathetic on one hand - since I understood the context of their suffering - and judgemental on the other - because their respective rage and self-obsession were detrimental to themselves and others. However, my research revealed that Mara and Sophia were not unlike the alazon and eiron character types whose conflict is often the basis for comic action (Frye 1967, 172), and therefore, not something the writer needs over-complicate by being judgemental or having an emotional attachment.

When Mara orchestrates the group deception of Azza, and poses as the head of a united and happy family, she is similar to the alazon, the impostor or pretender or hypocrite who functions as a blocking character (Frye 1967, 172), and is typified by the *senex iratus* or heavy or ferocious father figure (Frye 1967, 172) which, in *Jump for Jordan*, Mara embodies in female form. After her dream of raising a family in Jordan was shattered by Layla's murder, Mara comes to hate her diminished life in Australia, and refuses to forgive Sahir or to "land in this land" with him (scene 18). She wields her inflexibility like a weapon, using it to perform her pain and misfortune. However, when seen through the frame of play, and against the alazon character type, Mara's recalcitrant and hypocritical disposition sets her up to be a deserving comic butt (Charney 1978, 61-62). Her obstinacy of mind, and automatic and repetitive responses, warp her character, and create the impression that she is "more thing than person" (Bergson 1935, chapter 3). Like the General in Sun Tsu's story, she encrusts something mechanical on something living (Bergson 1935, chapter 3), imposes upon the free flow of experience (Charney 1978, 162), and becomes the subject of "corrective laughter" (Bergson, chapter 3) which, Bergson argues, works to target "slumbering" (Bergson, chapter 1) or thoughtless and habituated behaviours and beliefs.

When seen through the frame of play, and against the eiron character type, Sophia is revealed as the comic hero, as a chaotic life-affirming force, instead of the victim of her mother's rage and her family's unresolved grief and trauma. Like the eiron, Sophia is a

self-deprecator whose appearance is at odds with the truth (Charney 1978, 10). While not a cunning eironist - “sly, subtle, deceptive and wily” (Charney 1978, 10) - she is nevertheless a hardworking one, juggling multiple stories about her sexuality, same-sex relationship, and career. Understood emotionally, Sophia’s subterfuge is a survival tactic and plea for acceptance; but understood as stock comic behaviour, her subterfuge is a major driver of the dramatic irony which infuses the entire play, and declares that, within Frye’s six-phased comic spectrum, *Jump for Jordan*’s “mythos” or narrative archetype (Frye 1967, 162) is unequivocally ironic and satirical.

Along with stock character types, comic tropes provided plot points and story patterns against which I could assess the course and clarity of *Jump for Jordan*’s narrative. For example, viewed empathetically, Sophia’s unmarried flight from her home, and the ensuing shame and dis-ownership, are painfully symptomatic of cultural clash and family breakdown. However, viewed as a comic trope, they are the inevitable outcome of an “absurd, cruel, or irrational law” (Frye 1967, 166) of a usurping society which the comic hero is destined to challenge. The cruel law in this case is Mara’s stipulation that her daughters can leave home only as married women. It is cruel because it demands that Sophia and Loren live at home and suffer the brunt of Mara’s rage until they can publicly meet her requirements in terms of gender and heterosexuality. While Loren is more able to confirm to these demands than Sophia, the fact that she is planning to leave home by marrying a man she does not love exposes the potential of this way of thinking to undermine the institution it is meant to uphold. As a comic trope, the cruel law is a form of “ritual bondage” (Frye 1967, 169) to a rigid figure who deserves our reproving laughter, and the breaking of this law is all part of the fun (Frye 1967, 169). By the end of *Jump for Jordan*, both daughters have weathered considerable individual storms to break free of this bondage, and they are poised to begin living their own lives by their own values and expectations.

My research into types and tropes proved invaluable because it helped me to see the forces at work in the play. With comic models such as these in mind, and now able to exercise comic and critical distance, I could assess plot points as plot points, scenarios as scenarios, and thereby reduce the level of caution involved when writing culturally

sensitive scenes, and limit the degree of my emotional attachment. While I had developed the first draft of *Jump for Jordan* by attending to its innate story patterns and emergent poetics, the second draft was strategically and dramatically enhanced, and the transition to comedy fully achieved, via a study of comic conventions which, surprisingly, resonated with many of the play's characters and situations. I had created an original new Australian play, but was delighted by the sharpened focus, wit and dramatic action that eventuated from this attuning. As a feminist practitioner, I could "steal" and adapt what was needed and necessary - intelligently, not slavishly - once the first order generative process had made manifest the aesthetic imperatives and propositions of the new work.

FESTIVE OVERTHROW

Nelson states that comedy is also a manifestation of "the temporary inversion of social order" which is "often accompanied by mockery, victimization, and practical jokes" (Nelson 1990, 171). The laughter, licence and impulsive spontaneity that ensue from the relaxation of roles and hierarchies has mostly been seen as "redemptive and liberating" (Nelson 1990, 173), although, Turner's view that festivity may be an instrument of political control (Nelson 1990, 172), and Freud's that it harnesses natural anarchic instincts in the service of civilised society (Segal 2001, 7) are noted. While the purpose of festivity may vary across the comic spectrum, the essence of festivity has been said to be irresistible, "less a state of ceremony than it is a state of mind" (Segal 2001, 7), a "holiday from the super ego" (Ernst Kris quoted by Segal 2001, 7), and like dreams, a liberation from "primary process thinking" (Sigmund Freud quoted by Segal 2001, 2).

Before researching comedy, I had not appreciated the festivity waiting to be developed in *Jump for Jordan*. For example, I knew I wanted a scene in which Azza would loosen Mara's stranglehold on Sophia and Loren. Rather than confront Mara, I wanted Azza to take command of the domestic sphere by adapting the Jordanian custom of pampering the bride during a Sahra or pre-wedding party (scene 28). However, in early drafts, Azza's pointed intervention overshadowed the tone of the scene, and gave sarcasm

precedence over celebration. By shifting the tone, by bringing a festive spirit to this scene, I was able to do three things: allow Azza to use festivity to subversively destabilise Mara's coercive and inflexible authority; create a connection between Azza and her nieces that transcended their language barrier; and enable Sophia and Loren to act on a spontaneous and defiant impulse to disobey Mara, the killjoy, the enemy of mirth. However, as Nelson notes, the festive overthrow is only temporary:

> at the end of the festive period the tables are turned, authority is reasserted, and the representatives of riot and anarchy are subjected to real or symbolic punishment. (1990, 171)

Humiliated by her overthrow, and furious at Azza's subsequent offer to take Sophia back to Jordan, Mara slams the door on festivity and restores her social order. In scene 29, she interrupts Sophia and Loren's festivity-induced truce to convey Azza's offer and her own condition which is misattributed to her sister:

> MARA No. Azza wants me to teach you. She insists.
>
> SOPHIE That you teach me?
>
> MARA At home. You'll move home and learn from me, until your Arabic is not an embarrassment. Azza insists.
>
> SOPHIE But that could take years. I have flatmate obligations, a lease and
>
> MARA Azza insists. That's the offer. You're free to say no.
>
> (Jump for Jordan, scene 29)

By imposing this condition, Mara is reasserting her power, and attempting to thwart the formation of a bond or a coalition against her. News of the offer prompts Loren to turn on Sophia, and convince her that the offer is a plot to guilt her into an arranged marriage in order to restore Mara's honour. The revelry is over; and Avenging Azza, who has

been dormant since scene 13, is once again set free to wreak havoc with the impressionable and racist aspects of Sophia's imagination.

A NEW SOCIAL CENTRE

As mentioned, the first full draft of *Jump for Jordan* was downbeat, and focused on Sophia's losses. As I amplified the comedy, I came to agree with Lee Lewis and Cath McKinnon's view that the play called for Sophia to triumph over her circumstances. To refashion the final scenes, I had to work within the expectations that had been set by the play's transition to the comic mode. I had to ensure that the triumph of life over the law proved that Sophia was a worthy recipient of the prize at the end of the play (Charney 1978, 78). Conventionally, the prize awarded to the comic hero is marriage, which comedy celebrates as the doorway to renewal (Nelson 1990, 49). However, unlike much comedy, *Jump for Jordan* does not end in marriage; nor does it uphold the ideological notion that marriage is a woman's "chief goal and greatest desire" (Modleski 1989, 15). Indeed, for much of the play, marriage is presented in a less than idealised light: Mara's marriage is a site for resentment and retribution; Loren's intended marriage to Frank is a loveless tactic to escape Mara with her honour intact; Sophia's fantasied forced marriage, while comic, does not deny the actuality of this oppressive custom; and Sam's proposal to Sophia is a reminder that marriage equality is yet to become a political and social norm.

Instead of a reconciled bride and groom, *Jump for Jordan* concludes with reconciled sisters, and reconciled same-sex lovers (scene 40). This nevertheless serves the same comedic dramatic function of creating a hub of the new society that integrates and includes "as many people as possible" (Frye 1967, 163-67). Compared to the feasting and dancing that are usually expected at the end of a comedy (Charney 1978, 88), this final scene is modest, a simple sharing of food and plans. However, celebration is implied, because a release from animosity, obsession, habitual reactivity and concealment is made possible by this new ordinariness. As Frye states, comic endings such as this indicate that:

> … the movement from pistis to gnosis, from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom is fundamentally, as the Greek words suggest, a movement from illusion to reality. Illusion is whatever is fixed or definable, and reality is best understood as its negation: whatever it is, it is not that. (Frye 1967, 169-70)

Assessing my creative project through the lens of comedy enabled me to forge an ending for *Jump for Jordan* that was in line with my project aims. By the final scene (scene 40), hegemonic "truth" (Cixous 1976, 888) has been exposed as life-denying and self-interested. Sophia and Loren have found the strength to put the patriarchy in perspective (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 55) and to reject Mara's cultural and gender stipulations. Likewise, Sophia's reclaimed skills of interrogation have allowed her to challenge and disempower her racist fantasy. Within this new social centre, everyone is pragmatically free (Frye 1967, 169-170), even Mara, whose correction of Sophia's grammar is a sign that she is starting to accept the independent will of her daughters. Potently, something has shifted, some "neurosis" (Frye 1967, 171) has been removed, some "energy or memory" (Frye 1967, 171) has been restored, and a "new acceptance" has become apparent (Nelson 1990, 88). Frye tells us that something "gets born at the end of comedy" (Frye 1967, 170), and in *Jump for Jordan*, that something is a hard-earned peace which has taken a generation to achieve.

> And when Sophie does make her conclusions about herself, her relationships and her family, the ending is just as you'd hoped it would be. While charged with the potential to descend into saccharine romantic-comedy territory, it navigates its path with aplomb, heart and soul.
>
> (Saunders 2014)

By re-crafting *Jump for Jordan* as a comedy, I was able to be more robust with the characters and dramatic action, and less self-conscious about my fictional portrayal of a culture other than my own. By focusing on the comedic nuts and bolts, and the

competing life and death forces, I suspect that I had inadvertently taken Jacqueline Lo's advice and given my culturally diverse play a concrete and human base:

> To be effective and constructive, performances of difference must be grounded in social and material contexts… This concern with the everyday, the now rather than the mythic exclusiveness of a "homeland" challenges more conventional and dominant representations of multicultural arts. (Lo 1999, 97)

I also note that the play's transition to the comic mode places it within the tradition of Australian plays which have used humour to explore themes of exile and immigration, and issues of identity and belonging:

> A great deal of popular humour since the mid-1950s has been about the feelings of displacement, migration and otherness which are a large part of the social and personal experience of all Australians. Australia is a society made up of transplanted people, with also a dispossessed indigenous population whose joking is as much about rootless alienation as is the joking of the various waves of their dispossessors... The patterns of humour have been varied (within the various waves of migration) but a recurring one has been humour about the experience of not being at the centre of your parent culture. The anxiety which this causes has been a great source of comedy. (McCallum 1997, 206)

RECEPTIVITY TO DIALOGISM

This practice-led research revealed that the comic genre I was working in, and the language and structural strategies I had been developing for *Jump for Jordan*, were double-edged or double-dealing. They were speaking directly and obliquely, employing irony, and constantly shifting audience proximities to the content. In my previous plays, I had been aware of a tendency to construct plays using clash and counterpoint, but I had become cautious and hesitant about using such devices because, more often than

not, dramaturges and directors had regarded these as obstacles to narrative cohesion.[43] However, given the positive progress I was making with *Jump for Jordan*, I was coming to trust this tendency again. I was excited by the momentum and vigour it could bring to a play, and by the comedy that could emerge from the clash or gap between a play's components. I wondered whether this tendency might best be described as dialogic, but before I could lay claim to such a term, I had to explore dialogism as a playwriting strategy, understand its mechanics and theoretical basis.

As a practitioner and scriptwriting teacher, I was aware that dialogism did not feature in traditional dramatic writing pedagogy. I was aware of the Russian literary critic Mikhail M. Bakhtin's book *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), but since my interest was in dramatic writing, I instead sought out the work of theorists who discussed dialogism as dramaturgical rather than literary device. Returning to feminist theatre theory and practice, I discovered a germane article by Helene Keyssar, "Drama and the Dialogic Imagination: The Heidi Chronicles and Fefu and her Friends" (1996). Turning to the field of language-based playwriting, I re-discovered a book which had previously provided helpful terminology with which to teach feminist and non-traditional plays, *New Playwriting Strategies; A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting* (2001) by Paul C. Castagno.[44] Both Keyssar's article and Castagno's book discuss their respective interest in contemporary drama with reference to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Together, they informed the final drafts stage of *Jump for Jordan*, providing concepts and terminology which helped to consolidate an important evolutionary shift in my creative practice.

Helene Keyssar's engagement with Bakhtin's work is from the point of view of a feminist theatre theorist from the United States who has been especially informed by African-American and feminist drama (Keyssar 1996, 119). She begins her article by acknowledging Bakhtin's denunciation of drama as monologic (Keyssar 1996, 110), as

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[43] For example, such comments had been made about *A Summer Reign, The Daphne Massacre* (2003) and *The Rood Screen* (2006).

[44] As my focus is on dramatic texts, not post-dramatic texts, I have not included post-dramatic theatre theory in my research.

well as his description of dramatic action as a concept which "resolves all dialogic oppositions" due to its reliance on "unity" (Keyssar 1996, 111). Taking up Bakhtin's demand to question the accuracy and virtues of the Aristotelian model (Keyssar 1996, 111), Keyssar discusses this model's aversion to episodic structures and tangental elements that might undo the mandate of unity, or be superfluous to the need to serve the peripeteia (reversal of fortune) and anagnorisis (the recognition scene) (Keyssar 1996, 111-112). Keyssar argues that most Western drama, which pivots on these "essential structural elements" (Keyssar 1996, 111), is "formally and ideologically conservative" since it asserts that a character can move from ignorance to knowledge by heroically confronting their own history and discovering their own fixed and true nature (Keyssar 1996, 118).

Keyssar then proceeds to identify an alternative contemporary dramatic "genre" which offers possibilities not afforded by the Aristotelian model, employing strategies that "go hand in hand with the dialogic imagination" (119). Dispensing with the notion of a true and stable subject, this genre instead performs and urges "the transformation of persons and of images of each other" (119). It imagines "men and women in a continual process of becoming other" (119):

> In this form of drama, recognition scenes are either subordinate to the transformation scenes or are counter-productive: it is becoming other, not finding oneself, that is the crux of the drama. (Keyssar 1996, 119)

In a comment directly relevant to my creative project, Keyssar goes on to state that this genre rejects the monologism and the patriarchal authority of traditional drama, and, instead, "attempts to create a dramatic discourse that celebrates rather than annihilates or exiles difference" (Keyssar 1996, 119). Significantly, this genre does not suppress, violently silence or resolve difference. Instead, diverse voices animate each other, are affected by their structural mediation, and are understood to be mutable and evolving

phenomena.[45] Distinctly at odds with Aristotelian drama, Keyssar refers to this genre as either "dialogic" (122) or "polyphonic" (132) drama.

In Keyssar's essay, I found a dramaturgical description of the very play I was trying to write. I discovered an attitude of courageous advance and imaginative engagement which collaborated with difference in order to forge inclusive pathways and new possibilities. Instead of feeling the need to rein in my juxtapositional and contrapuntal sensibility, I could see that these impulses served a disruptive carnival spirit, and claimed theatrical space for diverse voices, registers and points of view. Most crucially, I understood that the dialogic mechanisms already at work within *Jump for Jordan* were providing more than a back-and-forth momentum or ironic comedy platform; they had established the groundwork for the strategy of inter-animation, and were the means by which the play's associative logic had evolved into associative causality.

As mentioned, my search for theorists who discussed dialogism as dramaturgical rather than literary device also led me to the work of playwright and academic Paul C. Castagno who, like Keyssar, hails from the United States. In 1990, while attending the Key West Literary Seminar (New Directions in American Theater), the strident presence of "language playwrights"[46] left a lasting impression on Castagno. He realised that the core tenets of playwriting orthodoxy did not apply to their plays because, shaped by the force of language "in its widest sense" (Castagno 2001, 2), they presented "a fundamentally different theoretical and practical approach to character, language and dramatic form" (Castagno 2001, 1). Believing that the virtuosic work of the Language Playwrights had necessitated a shift in the paradigm pertaining to the development and critique of new plays (Castagno 2001, 1), Castagno was compelled to study and codify their shared aesthetic tendencies in his book *New Playwriting Strategies; A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting* (2001).

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[45] This was also Bakhtin's understanding of language (Holquist 1981, xxviii).

[46] Playwrights who come under Casatgno's banner of Language Playwrights include Mac Wellman, Eric Overmyer, Len Jenkin, Connie Congdon, Suzan-Lori Parks and Paula Vogel.

Like Keyssar, Castagno arrives at a definition of dialogic drama by appraising his particular area of dramatic interest in relation to Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic novel (Castagno 2001, 2-3). Concurring with much of Keyssar's thesis, Castagno writes:

> The dialogic play is "fundamentally polyvocal (multi-voiced) or dialogic rather than monologic (single-voiced). The essence of the [play] is its staging of different voices or discourses and, thus, the clash of social perspectives and points of view" (Culler, 1997, 89; bracketed text added). Formally, dialogism represents the play's capacity to interact within itself, as if the various components were in dialogue with each other (Castagno 2001, 3).

First of all, in Castagno's schema, "the dialogic play is by definition polyvocal" (Castagno 2001, 35). Drawing upon excerpts of plays by the Language Playwrights, Castagno demonstrates that polyvocality is not merely the inclusion of more than one voice or perspective within the same play; it is a principle which asserts the freedom to use the full range of societal voices and dialects and lexicons, language registers and speech genres, popular and historical source materials, found texts, and even words arbitrarily inserted into characters' dialogue (Castagno 2001, 35). Castagno further asserts that, rather than subscribe to the revered notion of a single "playwright's voice" (Castagno 2001, 35), writers of dialogic plays are more concerned with how they may "orchestrate a polyphony of voices across an array of characters" (Castagno 2001, 35), more interested in writing processes and interactive dramaturgical relationships which shape a play as "an act of discovery" (Castagno 2001, 2 and 4).

Secondly, and fortuitously for my research project, Castagno's book provided a detailed analysis of the language, character, structural and formal strategies various Language Playwrights have utilised in the forging of their dialogic plays. Among his extensive glossary of new playwriting components, I discovered terminology that was retrospectively applicable to many of the strategies that I had been employing in *Jump for Jordan*. For instance, I could now see that the character of Azza was a dialogic exemplar. Azza exists in two guises: as Azza, the educated and activist Jordanian Aunt who subverts "customary representations" (Hart 1992, 8) of Arabic women; and as

Avenging Azza, Sophie's would-be nemesis who is a fantasy projection of her racist fears. As such, Azza is an "equivocal character" (Castagno 2001, 9); she has "the capacity to switch or transform from one character into another and back again" (Castagno 2001, 9), and the actor playing her is able to shift "between two or more significations" (Castagno 2001, 80). This switch back and forth activates a "character clash" (Castagno 2001, 8), the juxtaposition of characters from opposing genres or contexts (Castagno 2001, 8), thereby making a robust contribution to the play's genre-blending or hybrid form. Further, the character of Avenging Azza is carnivalesque in form and function; she is a theatrically-based grotesque, an inflated Oriental caricature who confronts the norms and biases of this world with the outrageous precepts of her own (Castagno 2001, 5). As Castagno notes, such a character is not intended to "mirror or represent the real world" (Castagno 2001, 6), but is instead creating a parallel "antiworld" (Castagno 2001, 5) that exists in direct dialogue with the world that we perceive as "real" (Castagno 2001, 6). The oscillation back and forth between the two Azzas is triggered or animated by the interplay of Sophia's comic paranoia and the present tense narrative strand which, in effect, can summon Avenging Azza, even mid-scene (for example, in scene 13 and scene 29). The two Azzas are the most politically charged characters in the play, and as such, their characterisation was often impacted by polemic, earnestness or caution. However, once I could view them in dialogic relationship, I could let go of my anxieties, focus on amplifying their comedy and anchoring their theatrical traction, and trust in their combined capacity to generate critique of stereotypical Arabic identities.

The volume of dialogic strategies I had inadvertently employed in *Jump for Jordan*, and my aforementioned affinity with devices such as juxtaposition and contrapuntal structures, suggested that I had "an exceptional receptivity to dialogism" (Keyssar 1996, 122). Perhaps, as Keyssar suggests, my social and political context made this inevitable because "feminist dramas are the voices of marginal folk, voices that are both in conflict with dominant ideological positions and resistant among themselves to the reductions of uniformity" (Keyssar 1996, 122). The plays I had written over the last two decades did indeed exhibit a dialogic predisposition, no doubt due to the struggle to give form to marginalised voices including my own, to aesthetic inspiration derived from plays by

female playwrights, and to an intuitive delight in ironic comedy which, according to J. L. Styan, is designed "to create the conditions for thinking" (Styan 1968, 46).

THE DIALOGIC IMPERATIVE

Reframing *Jump for Jordan* as a dialogic play created a less problematic base from which to complete this creative project. Conceptually, I understood that the play's dialogic mechanisms embedded the staging of different voices and perspectives inside its syntax, and defied monologism-at-large with its "threat of polyphony" (Keyssar 1996, 115), therefore providing appropriate support for my project's inclusive and anti-authoritarian aims. Practically, it enabled me to respond with greater awareness and agility to the play's formation. Instead of treating a word, image, speech or scene as an island of signification, or piece of plot progression, I embraced the principle of dialogic interplay and the emergence of inter-animation, and experienced the shaping of the play as "an act of discovery" (Castagno 2001, 2). Politically, I remained convinced that form has political implications, and that structures create meaning (Tait 1994, 13). While the plays of the Language Playwrights in Castagno's study might promote the aesthetic nature of play construction over political or thematic content, and might therefore be "devoid of an overt political agenda or particular cause" (Castagno 2001, 6), *Jump for Jordan* is a play which urges transformation, and is therefore intended to be a manifestation of political and aesthetic struggle (Keyssar 1984).

Furthermore, as I considered the "dialogic imperative" (Castagno quoting Bakhtin 2001, 149) at the heart of dialogic plays, I was aware that one might be able to draw a parallel with the concept of "Other love", the impetus which was said to fuel *écriture féminine* (Cixous 1976, 893). Just as the dialogic imperative "insures that there can be no true monologue" (Castagno quoting Bakhtin 2001, 149), Cixous perceives in écriture féminine a new love which "dares for the other, wants the other, makes dizzying, precipitous flights between knowledge and invention" (Cixous 1976, 893). While Other love might approximate the writing impetus of *Jump for Jordan* - a courageous advance, and an imagination engagement with the Other - the term came conflated with an essentialist legacy and an implied maternal metaphor, heavily gendered associations

which, as mentioned, generally served to trouble my creative footing. I preferred the term "dialogic imperative" because it was adrift from a gendered or binary context, and associations, if there were any, were connected with literature, and emphasised potentiality rather than protest.

Bakhtin had argued that dialogism was "key to the de-privileging of absolute, authoritarian discourses" (Keyssar 1996, 110). By activating the dialogic imperative at work within *Jump for Jordan*, I realised that I could also de-privilege the "absolute, authoritarian discourses" that had displaced me from the centre of my own practice. As the orchestrator of a polyphony (Castagno 2001, 35), my purpose was no longer primarily to undermine traditional structures, or to "blow up the Law" (Cixous 1976, 887), but to think like a "master strategist" (Castagno 2001, 35), see difference as an opportunity, and trust the dialogic imperative that this disposition unleashed. This involved putting down the feminist tools of opposition and disturbance, which targeted the phallocentric centre, and picking up the tool of activation, which could be wielded only from a central position. It was as if power had been devolved to me in a bloodless coup. As if, like the characters at the end of a comedy, I had progressed to a "new social centre" in which I could be pragmatically free (Frye 1967, 169-170). As if I had finally cultivated "the habit of freedom" (Woolf 1929, 117), and the ability to write "without awareness of my sex" (Woolf 1929, 117), two of the preconditions for female writers which, according to Virginia Woolf, would enable Shakespeare's sister to be reborn (Woolf 1929, 117).

PRODUCTION

PROGRAMMING

As discussed, multicultural and cross-cultural theatre had been relegated to the poorly-resourced fringes, the representation of diversity on Australian stages had diminished, and the concept of multiculturalism had become problematic and passé (Mead 2008, 12). A play like *Jump for Jordan* - a female-authored, large cast, cross-cultural, original ironic comedy which places Arabic, lesbian and female characters at the heart of its

fractured narrative - was therefore unlikely to receive a mainstream production within the contemporary Australian theatre landscape. However, in 2014, the Griffin Theatre Company's Artistic Director, Lee Lewis, included *Jump for Jordan* in her inaugural season. While the mainstream programming of this play was anomalous within the contemporary Australian theatre landscape, it was indicative of the fact that Lewis has been a vocal advocate for theatre which is inclusive and culturally diverse, and for plays which generate and frame complex discussions on contemporary issues and national direction.[47] Without the cultural leadership of Lewis, the support of the Griffin board and community, and the calculated risk they were prepared to take, one may wonder whether *Jump for Jordan* would have found mainstream favour or been able to reach its intended audience.

SCRIPT ASSESSMENT

The script of *Jump for Jordan* was not written in complete and sequential drafts. Some sections were rewritten many times over many years, while others were rewritten rapidly only two or three times. However, the draft which I recognise as the first, and was leaning towards the tragic mode, received script assessment feedback from my university supervisors Dr Catherine Fargher and Dr Cath McKinnon, and from director Lee Lewis. Subsequent drafts, written in the comic mode, received script assessment feedback from Dr Cath McKinnon, visiting Jordanian performer Dana Dajana, and playwright Alison Lyssa.

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

On 22 and 23 of August 2013, *Jump for Jordan* received a two day creative development workshop. The workshop was conducted by the Griffin Theatre Company, in association with Playwriting Australia and the University of Sydney (USyd), and held at the Rex Cramphorn Studio, a venue within USyd's Department of Theatre and Performance Studies. The workshop was directed by Iain Sinclair, the dramaturge was

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[47] Lee Lewis is the author of *Cross-Racial Casting: Changing the Faces of Australian Theatre*, Platform Paper # 13, published by Currency Press (2007)

Jane Bodie, and Artistic Director of Playwriting Australia Tim Roseman was also present to provide dramaturgical comment. The actors were Alice Ansara, Sheradin Harbridge, Camilla Ah Kin, Fayssal Bazzi, Lyn Pierce and Billie Rose Prichard. This was the first time the script had been read aloud by actors, and fortunately, most were from an Arabic-speaking background, and able to assess the play's cultural plausibility. The workshop was observed by Dr Laura Ginters' USyd Dramaturgy students who later did an assignment on the script's development. The workshop exploration could be summed up in the following question: how can a play that is full of deceit, mistranslation, false assumption and irony, and has a fractured narrative structure, not confuse or lose an audience? Director Iain Sinclair made the point that "You can go over the top once you've got a bottom. Once you work out what's going on, you can go wild" (Abela 2010-2014, 23 August 2013). The workshop therefore focused on interrogating the plot and characters for comprehension and plausibility and unanswered questions, identifying concrete verbal and visual markers, clarifying the translation convention, and on the need to keep Sophia present in every scene. The director concluded that "agency is in the play's mechanism, not in the protagonist" (23 August 2013), and the dramaturge observed that when the play exists in the realm of brain and heart, it works (23 August 2013).[48]

PLAYREADING

On 7 November 2013, the next draft of *Jump for Jordan* received a half-day round table reading in the Kings Cross office of the Griffin Theatre Company. The reading was directed by Iain Sinclair, and the dramaturges were Jane Bodie and Jennifer Medway. The actors were Camilla Ah Kin, Doris Younane, Billie Rose Prichard, Julia Ohannessian, Aimée Falzon, Martin Shaynd and Alice Ansara. The reading was attended by Griffin Theatre Company staff and associate artists, and members of the *Jump for Jordan* creative team. Discussion focused on the need for each relationship arc to be clear, the purpose of the imagined scenes, the details of the Layla subplot, the need

[48] The play's "mechanism" or structure *is* the protagonist's psyche. They are one and the same. The assumption they were separate might explain some of the problems later encountered in rehearsal.

for key scenes to "land" rather than be interrupted, and overcoming the language barrier in the Azza and Sophia's climactic scene without resorting to a third party or a digital device.

REHEARSAL

The five-week rehearsal period for *Jump for Jordan* began on 6 January 2014, and was held at the Square House at the University of New South Wales. The director was Iain Sinclair and the dramaturge was Jennifer Medway. The actors were Alice Ansara, Sheridan Harbridge, Anna Houston, Sal Sharah, Doris Younane and Camilla Ah Kin, the majority of whom were from Arabic-speaking backgrounds, and able to continue to test the play's cultural plausibility. The production team was Edwina Guinness (stage manager), Pip Runicman (designer), Nicholas Rayment (lighting designer), Nate Edmundson (composer and sound designer) and Gabrielle Rogers (voice coach).

On the first day of rehearsal, in an address to the creative team, Lee Lewis likened the development and production of a new play to an extreme sport. In the case of Jump for Jordan this was no exaggeration. The minimal creative development the script had received consisted entirely of table work, or script discussion and analysis. Therefore, the play's temporal and spatial shifts, dream logic, and performative and tonal variations up and down the comic spectrum, still had to be tested on the floor. In other words, the creative development of the script, and a full rewrite, had to be completed during the rehearsal period, and under the pressure of imminent production. Furthermore, the dramaturgical literacy of the highly-skilled creative team did not extend to feminist aesthetics or alternative forms. While I trusted the inner workings of the play, which had been felt and intuited as much as they had been strategised, at the time I did not fully understand the play's dynamics, nor have the terminology which would have enabled me to explain and advocate for the play's associative logic, associative causality, ironic and absurd comedy.

On the second day of rehearsal, while describing *Jump for Jordan* to a marketing staff member, the director said that the play had an instinctive, not linear, structure; that if you throw it to the wind, it made a "crazy sense" (Abela 2010-2014, 7 January 2014). While some features of this crazy sense were embraced and explored - for example, the interplay of "ontological realities", and the ability of characters to "sixth-sense" or border-cross - other features were over-ridden by a default to traditional dramaturgical readings and solutions, and an aesthetic preference for "dramatic propulsion". For example, some scenes were rearranged to make linear sense and logical connection, language play was cut in the interests of clarity and pace, and requests to cut the non-realist characters of Avenging Azza and Truckie Sam, and the non-realist Sam and Sahir scene (scene 33) were persistent. However, when the play was conventionalised, when its logical structures were privileged, or when the comedy was rendered as parody not irony, a run-through would often quickly reveal that something vital had been diminished. It was as if the play could not breathe. As if something qualitative had been lost. Throughout the rehearsal period, the analogy of breathing often recurred as a benchmark for the production as it took shape. In hindsight, I came to see that this analogy of breathing also pointed to the curious fact that, in rehearsal, *Jump for Jordan* had behaved like an organism, not a mechanism. Fuelled by the life-energy of comedy, and built from inter-connecting and inter-animating structures, it behaved like a living system. While I had not yet acquired the terminology to explain and advocate for the play effectively, on the floor it had asserted the form that had emerged from its making, thrived when this form had been understood, and revealed itself as resilient.

PRODUCTION

The production of *Jump for Jordan* previewed at the 102 seat SWB Stables Theatre in Kings Cross in Sydney on 13 of February 2014. Once it was seen it on stage, and in front of an audience, minor script adjustments were made for clarity, and parodic sound and lighting elements - for example, the use of Orientalist music such as the Sheikh of Araby - were removed so that the play could breathe. The show opened on 19 February, and played until 29 of March, before transferring to the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre at Wollongong where it played from 2 to 5 of April as part of the Merrigong

Theatre Company 2014 program.[49] No changes to the script were made once the show had opened. However, minor changes were made to the post-production draft which is the draft included in this thesis, and the one made available for study purposes or subsequent productions.

Jump for Jordan was staged on one set which represented the inside of Mara's home. A pile of sand spilt in through a window, and was incorporated into each scene - sat on as if furniture, stood on as if the Citadel. As reviewer Jason Blake commented, "designer Pip Runciman's set brings the deserts of the Middle East to suburban Australia, spilling a huge drift of sand into a domestic scene in a way that is simultaneously poetic and ominous" (Blake 2014). Blackouts were not employed as changes in scene, location, or level of consciousness were signalled by action, speech, props and lighting. Entrances often occurred before a previous scene had finished, and the play's resultant fast pace was often remarked upon (Aouf 2014; Simmons 2014; Jackson 2014). Reviewers variously described the production as an energetic dash "between realism, farce and surrealism" (Jones 2014); as "bold, ambitious, successful in its gambits, full of truths and the most high-energy beast on a Sydney stage" (Aouf 2014); as "an extraordinary volatile powder keg of politics, family and emotions which sets the tiny stage of the Griffin alight" (Lancaster 2104); and as "a joyous, tearful, hilarious and heartfelt experience" (Simmonds 2014).

PUBLICATION

Plays which premiere at the Griffin Theatre Company are published by Currency Press, the principle publisher of Australian plays. The publication doubles as the theatre program and is available for purchase at the box office from opening night onwards. Preparation of the typescript took place during the rehearsal period, while the play was still being developed and re-written, and no alterations were possible after 29 of January 2014. Unfortunately, the published script went to press as a work-in-progress before a number of key scenes had been resolved. Publication by Currency Press is an honour,

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[49] Wollongong is a regional city approximately eighty kilometres south of Sydney.

however, I regret that an inferior version of *Jump for Jordan* is now widely available. While it contains a sentence informing readers that the "play went to press before the end of rehearsals and may differ from the play as performed" (Abela 2014), anecdotally I know that once a play is published it is that version that is studied as the authoritative text.

ANALYSIS

RECEPTION

The audience response to *Jump for Jordan* was very positive. Attendance exceeded box office targets, and the Sydney season sold out most nights. I attended the four previews, the opening and closing nights, and at least two shows per week during the run, and had the opportunity to speak with audience members in the foyers afterwards. I participated in, or was present for, post-show Q & A sessions in both Sydney and Wollongong. I was in regular contact with the cast, creative team, and company, who passed on audience feedback and observations. I received numerous emails from friends and playwrighting peers about their experience of the show. I also discovered a post on Sajjeling,[50] and five posts by community members associated with Urban Theatre Projects in Bankstown in Western Sydney. The critical response to *Jump for Jordan* was also very positive. Eighteen reviews were published either in the mainstream, gay, arts, and entertainment press, or published on the websites of independent theatre reviewers. It was also appraised in the 2015 NSW Premier's Literary Award judges' report. The following overview of the response to *Jump for Jordan* is based on these sources.

AN AUSTRALIAN STORY

> It was wonderful to see theatre that reflected our contemporary world, not to mention a story about 5 women and one man! (Playwright peer, 23 March 2014)

Based on my theatre-going experience, and on comments provided by writers such as Archer (2005, 2-5), Fotheringham (1998), and Fensham and Varney (2005, 47), my monolithic conception of a mainstream audience had put me on a defensive footing. I

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[50] "Sajjeling provides a platform for discussion, exploration and the consideration of ideas that affect the Arab-Australian diaspora. We showcase a diversity of opinions and perspectives, and we keep tabs on events and issues impacting our communities. We feature serious and lighthearted pieces on politics, society, culture, cinema, food, and the arts." http://sajjeling.com/2014/04/09/jump-for-jordan/ accessed 31 March 2015.

had assumed that my target audience would subscribe to the white and homogenous "myth of the mainstream" (Archer 2005, 2-5), would be accustomed to Australian theatre's "inurement to whiteness" (Lewis 2007, 2), and might not welcome my disruption of their "tribal safety" (Archer 2005, 2-5). While this might generally characterise the audience for big mainstream state theatre companies, the visibly diverse audience for this small mainstream production of *Jump for Jordan* commonly responded with enthusiasm and an affinity which was surprising, intriguing, humbling, and a great relief.

While the play's exploration of the negative perceptions of Arabs in Australia was understood (Succar 2014), the audience and critical response to the play indicated that it had transcended its polemical purpose. After each show, audience members would remind us that, despite its cultural specificity, *Jump for Jordan* was "such an Australian story" (Jones 2014). Many would share a migration experience - their own, their parents', their partner's, their friend's - and discuss it in relation to issues raised in the play: the pain of displacement and loss, the gift and burden of cultural heritage, the adoption of equivocal lives, the daily clash of cultures. Sophia's overactive mind (Dunn 2014) and foot in two worlds (Lancaster 2014), Sahir's "gentle dignity" (Jackson 2014) or passion for a new life (Cranston 2014), Azza's contrasting elegance and threat (Lancaster 2014), and Mara's achingly sad incapacity to adapt (Joy 2014) were commonly singled out for comment by audience and reviewers alike. Lee Lewis and I also observed that people were often moved to reflect upon the ordeals of mothers who had sacrificed much to raise children in a new country (Abela 2010-2014, 31 March 2014), including English-speaking people from Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England. The fact that the play was also "an unflinching portrayal of strong female characters" (Dash 2014) often drew positive comment. Significantly, no conversation or critique I encountered baulked at the lesbian protagonist, or her blended lesbian-Arabic-female subjectivity; and like some first- and second-generation Australians in the audience, some lesbian and gay audience members from CALD backgrounds similarly exclaimed "that's my story". One particular young man, who discovered the cast travelling on a train from Sydney to Wollongong, comes to mind:

> camilla told me the story of the cast coming down on the train. a young man got into the carriage and saw the cast and went, oh my God, Jump for Jordan, i wrote an essay about you! he was so excited, he said I'm Sophie. he is a gay egyptian university student at UNSW. after the play he came out to 3 people. not his family. he asked could he show them his essay and he took out his laptop and read it to them, it contained lots of superlatives…. the play seems to have created new spaces in the lives of some of the people who saw it… the client who disclosed family pain to the banker and forever changed that relationship… the boy who found the courage to come out… the people who had new insight into what their own mothers had suffered… it opened up spaces for the other…. (Abela 2010-2014, 3 April 2014).

I had written the play in the hope that a more or less homogenous audience might imaginatively engage with the Arabic Other. However, the play brought "a whole new audience into the theatre" (Doris Younane quoted in Abela 2010-2014, 3 April 2014), and "really spoke" to a diverse demographic (Simon Hinton[51] quoted in Abela 2010-2014, 3 April 2014) for whom the Other was not a stranger or an abstraction, but someone they knew or loved or had been. As such, the Other could exist on both sides of the footlights, as blended subjectivities which had weathered or witnessed complex cross-cultural maelstroms:

> Camilla said that during the Nakba scene once she could see a man quietly nodding to himself all through the scene. (Abela 2010-2014, 31 March 2014)

It may be fair to say that audiences embraced the play because it created space for their own lived experience of difference, and offered a culturally-specific world which nevertheless conveyed transcultural themes with comedy and pathos:

> Doris said there was a small but interested group for the talk Saturday afternoon. about 13 of the 15 had seen the play and were keen to talk about it. They really

[51] Artistic Director of Merrigong Theatre Company.

> wanted to discuss the issue of being a second generation australian, no matter the country of origin. this is the impact the play seems to be having, putting the audience in touch with stories within their own families in ways they had not previously appreciated, and then wanting to talk about it. (Abela 2010-2014, 6 April 2014)

> It's a play that takes a history of dispossession, conflict and occupation and creates an oasis of belonging and understanding in its narrative and characterisation that leaves us feeling that every person has a chance to move forward, embrace but not be paralysed by the past. (Simmons 2014)

The audience hostility or resistance I had expected, at least in part, or from some quarters, did not eventuate (Abela 2010-2014 3 April 2014); the response, in the main, was much more humbling:

> I asked Doris Younane how was it doing the show night after night and she said the audience gives. They sit in the theatre and lean into the show and give. She said there was a real hunger for these sorts of stories. (Abela 2010-2014, 31 March 2014)

REFRESHING

> *Jump for Jordan* is the perfect play for Australia now. (Saunders 2014)

Instead of an "inurement to whiteness" (Lewis 2007, 2), audiences and reviewers alike generally shared the opinion of Jason Blake who described *Jump for Jordan* as "a welcome shot in the arm for diversity on our stages" (Blake 2014). Many were aware of the play's 1980s antecedents, and the vacuum it was attempting to fill: "Such alternative takes on Australian identity, a "new multiculturalism", appeared on our stages in the late 1980's. It's good to see them back!" (Portus 2014). However, as the following quotes indicate, the widespread use of the adjectives such as "fresh", "refreshing" and "vivid"

indicates that the play overcame any concerns that the narrative may be passé, cliché (Panopolous 2014) or stereotypically parodic (Sobott 2014):

> This surprisingly funny and very moving play, directed by Iain Sinclair, deals with issues that first became familiar in the drama of multiculturalism in the 1980s, but it does so with such a freshness that the story feels as if it is being told for the first time. (McCallum 2014)

> Although multiculturalism has been a theatre subject for many years now, the freshness of Abela's script, her compassion and understanding for all her characters, and the comedy with which she expresses family conflict make for a very satisfying emotional resolution. (Dunn 2014)

> The story's freshness came from the way the timeline unfolded – the interplay between past and present, and the vivid glimpses into the characters' dream-states and imaginations. (Panopolous 2014)

> It is really refreshing to watch a cast of feisty woman characters and a story written from the perspective of the Arab diaspora, in this case Christian. (Sobott 2014)

> While much of it is comic and performed with high energy, Abela's script also offers some fresh insights into the migrant experience, especially the enduring attachment to the place of origin. (Hannon 2104)

> The play is funny, melancholic, and, best of all, empathetically informative of what, I have come to know to be traumatic cultural and social adjustments, for all, in those families. It is the first time that I have witnessed such lives on our stages, so vividly. (Jackson 2014)

STRUCTURES AND STRATEGIES

The response to *Jump for Jordan*'s structures and dramaturgical strategies was equally enthusiastic. It was without a degree of resistance or hostility I had anticipated, and without the confusion we in the rehearsal room had feared:

> And I'm still impressed by the way, as an audience member, it was always clear when the actors were speaking "Arabic", and the back story and fantasy/ projections were worked in without becoming confusing. (Email from an acquaintance, 16 February 2014)

> Abela has constructed a delicately layered piece where time and place run into each other like shifting sands, and it's been hardily honed at Griffin. (Aouf 2014)

> *Jump for Jordan* takes a risk in jumping between multiple timelines and two vastly different countries but, despite the simple staging of a kitchen table half-buried in a mountain of sand, it manages to convey both time and place effectively. The actors also cleverly and effectively create the experience of watching a film half in English and half subtitled - no mean feat - which provides the opportunity for some of the best laughs. (Brag 2014)

> Abela and director Iain Sinclair have made scenes work almost cinematically. There are hard and soft edits and jump cuts which evoke the capricious nature of memory and the way vignette (sic) from one's past bubble to the surface and destabilise emotions and behaviour. These are deeply effective. (Syke 2014)

From the first preview performance onwards, audiences indicated that they could "read" both the logical and associative structures and strategies. For example, they readily accepted and understood the play's archaeological conceit (Saunders 2014), the time and space shifts (Aouf 2014), the juxtaposition of internal and external experience (Dunn 2014), the translation device of dramatic irony (Lloyd 2014), and the equivocal characterisation of Azza (Lancaster 2014). In addition to making sense of the play's form, audiences and reviewers expressed a complex understanding of the purpose behind the various strategies. For example, Azza's equivocality was seen as representing

a clash of cultures (Lancaster 2014) and the protagonist's conflictual mind (Dunn 2014); and the life-loving dead Sahir was seen as providing an emotional centre to the story (Jackson 2014), giving expression to the characters' deepest desires (Dash 2014), and embodying a "desolate disappointment in his own heritage" (Succar 2014). I was particularly affected whenever audiences or reviewers singled out scene 33, a logically implausible scene in which dead Sahir meets Truckie Sam in an outback roadhouse. Trusting in the play's dream logic, and the emotional rightness of the scene, I resisted considerable rehearsal room pressure to cut it from the play. However, for audiences, the fact that it conveyed sense beyond literal logic, represented "the unconditional acceptance of her relationship that she (Sophie) so desperately longs for" (Dash 2014), and functioned as an emotional touchstone within the narrative, needed no explanation.

Fortunately, the structures and strategies were not merely comprehensible. As noted in the above quote by Panopolous, they were also credited with creating the play's "freshness" (Panopolous 2014); the swift tonal shifts (Jackson 2014), daring juxtapositions (Jackson 2014), linguistic dexterity (Lloyd 2014), highly imaginative and emotionally true writing (Hannon 2014), and interplay of temporalities and dream states (Panopolous 2014), certainly contributed to the high level of audience enjoyment and engagement. However, two reviewers expressed reservations about *Jump for Jordan*'s structures and strategies, and credited the director with making up for the play's faults.

> Director Iain Sinclair negotiates some awkward story architecture to deliver a play which is memorable, funny and tender. (Portus 2014)

> Dispensing with straightforward chronology - Abela likens her shuffled scenes to a disturbed archaeological site - Jump for Jordan vacillates between broad sitcom, gay soap opera and heated domestic drama over the course of its 90 minutes. It is an uneven ride, though one that proves satisfying in the end, thanks to the acting flair and design choices in this lively and intelligent production from director Iain Sinclair. (Blake 2014)

While these comments by senior male reviewers are far from damning, two trends can be observed within the pool of criticism the play received. Firstly, female and younger reviewers did not convey a view that the structure was defective or salvaged. Secondly, the language used by senior male reviewers to describe the arrangement of scenes - "shuffled" (Blake 2014), "paraded" (Portus 2014) or "juggled" (Jackson 2014), for example - contrasted with the language used by female or young reviewers, playwrighting peers, and friends - "a well oiled-machine" (Simmons 2014), "tightly interwoven" (Succar 2014), "technically accomplished" (Friend, 24 March 2014), a "clear and concise and an entirely absorbing 90 minutes that zoom by in frequent flashes of brilliance" (Simmonds 2014), a beautiful melding of shifts in time, reality and the imaginary (Playwright peer 23 March 2014), and, "time and space burst out of the prevaricating order that fights to smother life in its self-constructed trap" (Playwright peer 26 February 2014). I mention this simply because I am reminded of the aforementioned and abiding view that women writing in experimental form just "can't do structure", and am relieved to see that this view is not ubiquitous.

COMEDY AND PATHOS

Without doubt, the most difficult balancing act in the writing and production of *Jump for Jordan* had to do with the play's dance up and down the comic spectrum, from festive and ironic to absurd and dark. A slight shift in the tone of the writing or performance could push a scene into an inappropriate part of the spectrum, and correspondingly, overlay it with inappropriate intent or interpretation. The right balance was struck only after it went live before an audience because, as experience has repeatedly shown, it is often the audience that reveals the nature of a play to the players and producers.

The comedic elements in *Jump for Jordan* - which were variously described as "sit-com and farce" (Simmonds 2014) "gay soap opera" (Blake 2014), "surrealism" (Jones 2014) and "comedy of errors" (Sykes) - led some audience members and reviewers to express concern about the use of comedy in a play of serious and cross-cultural themes. The fast-paced performance style, and the sometimes broad comic characterisation, struck

one audience member as initially “over the top” (Lloyd 2014). Another expressed concern that the characters might become “stereotypical and the butt of mainstream humour” but thought that “the ongoing development of the characters and moments of calm sensitivity” redeemed the play’s “borderline moments” (Sobott 2014).

Crikey reviewer Lloyd Bradford Syke expressed the greatest concern over the play’s handling of comedy because, in his view, it “tended to mask, rather than alleviate the weight of more serious intentions”, threatened “to squander all the play’s potential”, and tended “a little too much to the fluffy and throwaway” (Syke 2014). In particular, Syke pointed the finger at an aspect of the production which a number of Arabic-speaking and CALD artsworkers on opening night, and I at times, felt tipped the play towards ethnic parody - the use of a coached dialect:

> … it does seem a little askew to have installed Gabrielle Rogers as a dialect coach, given that so many of her charges come from an Arabic background. The irony is these attempts at the elongated vowels of the ethnolect familiar to residents of some of Sydney’s south-western suburbs are approximate and fluctuating, at best. When it’s played for comedy it all gets a bit Wogs Out of Work. (Sykes 2014)

However, these valid reservations and sensitivities were in the minority, as most audience members and reviewers tended to see the play as much more than a comedy:

> But Donna Abela’s script goes a long way beyond this simple set-up, adding layers of personal and political history and poetry that turn it into something much more than the simple comedy it might have been. (McCallum 2014)

Surveying the reviews and responses, I am struck by how often the play had elicited laughter and tears, sadness and joy. It was the most frequent comment expressed in person or by email, and was a recurring theme in theatre reviews (Simmonds 2014; Joy 2014; Time Out 2014, McAlister 2014):

> With this juxtaposition and the arrangement of scenes and moments within scenes, Abela navigates a satisfying line between comedy and pathos. (Time Out 2014)
>
> Congratulations to director Iain Sinclair, this was a great production with the humour countered by the just the right amount of pathos. (Joy 2014)
>
> The play made me laugh and it made me cry all the way into my bones. It was at the same time entertaining and dramatic and absolutely believable and authentic. (Email from a friend, 17 April 2014)

The play, having found a way to blend comic and critical distance with empathetic identification and proximity, seems to have succeeded in creating a world in which most of the audience could glean the pain beneath the posturing, understand the cost and contradiction of equivocality, and derive satisfaction from the sustained interplay of humour and poignancy and pathos.

GOVERNANCE THROUGH SHARING

> Without a doubt, feminism continues to require its own forms of serious play.
>
> (Butler 1990/2008, xxx)

As mentioned, *Jump for Jordan*'s form was originally conceived of as a disturbed archaeological dig site; it would be constructed from strata of occupation (chronological events) which had collapsed in on each other. To make sense of the play, Sophia, and the audience, would have to participate in a type of dig, re-sequencing fragments and understanding them in context; to write such a play, I would have to explore the porous or transmissible borders between scenes, between temporal and spatial spheres, and work with the connectivity, frisson or clash created at their juncture.

However, during the first draft, what began as a dramaturgical approximation of a disturbed dig site began to approximate the workings of a human psyche. The narrative

layers moved beyond the straightforward representation of present and past scenes, and began to incorporate memory, dream, fantasy projection, and conversations with the dead. Associatively or linguistically triggered, these layers began to break down the walls between inner and outer realities and, not unhappily, validated the view, which Cixous asserts through the aesthetics of her fiction, that the human subject does not erroneously split internal from external lived experience or complexity (Gendlin 1984, 149).

The human psyche which began to manifest within the play's structure belonged to Sophia. Having emerged from the idea of a disturbed dig site, which in turn had emerged from the idea of occupation and conflict, Sophia's psyche was not stable or unified. Additionally, as a female and a lesbian and an Arabic-Australian, each of her identity markers existed marginally and problematically within her social and political context, placing her in an inevitably dialogic relationship with the "dominant ideological positions" (Keyssar 1996, 122) she comes into conflict with throughout the play: patriarchal gender prescriptions, compulsory heterosexuality, and Orientalist xenophobia. Sophia's oscillation between her lived experience and her attempts to "pass" for heterosexual or feminine or Jordanian generated much of the play's comedy; it also forged a subjectivity which is constantly shifting between cultural frameworks and levels of consciousness, "constantly thrown into process by the competing discourses through which identity might be claimed" (Dolan 1996, 96). However, as I worked to dramatise Sophia's shifting subjectivity - her passing and negotiating, reacting and yearning, integrating and avoiding - I began to see that she was "thrown into process" (Dolan 1996, 96) by something in addition to the play's competing ideological discourses. That is, it was as if the play's dialogic form was sentient, and was putting Sophia through the mill.

As a playwright, plays in which the form has force, has a type of meta-consciousness which commands and contextualises its components, and calls an audience into an awakened understanding of the whole, have been key inspirations. Examples of these include *Far Away* and *Love and Information* by Caryl Churchill, and *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* by Suzan Lori-Parks. While I did not originally

intend for *Jump for Jordan* to evolve in this direction, I can see in hindsight that the influence of such plays on my practice, and the over-arching dig site structure, together with the confluence of *Jump for Jordan*'s dialogic organising principle and comedic dream logic, created conditions which evolved the play's dramaturgy into a "linguistic playing field" (Castagno 2001, 152). This had a type of holistic agency or sentience, and which was constantly presenting the audience with a something more than surface logic and conscious perception.

I therefore came to see that *Jump for Jordan*'s form had developed from a sphere of disturbance into a sphere of being, a safety net for the somersaults of Sophia's troubled conscious and unconscious mind. The logical present tense plot - Sophia's experience of Azza's visit - is subjected to a bombardment of associatively and linguistically triggered memories and fantasies. Whether representing inward or external reality, each scene is from Sophia's perspective, and each narrative fragment is called forth by a logical or subtextual or emotional beat experienced by Sophia in response to specific events in the unfolding play. In this way, and in step with Castagno's observation of polyvocal plays, the structure of *Jump for Jordan* had become "a product of the relational patterns between building blocks" (Castagno 2001, 6). However, the relational patterns in this script were not merely aesthetic and linguistic; they were also subjective, the sinews of Sophia's subjectivity as it shifts and responds and reels in relation to specific events; they are in-between divinations which prompt the various levels of Sophia's consciousness to step up to the dramaturgical plate; and as they operate within a frame of play, they variously offer her comfort, context, perspective, dread, and dates with her own ignorance.

Once again, I am reminded of the qualities which Cixous ascribes to *écriture féminine*, and remain uncomfortable with their application to the process I used to write *Jump for Jordan*. The play's dialogic imperative, interactive and inter-animating components, and holistic field of being, could certainly be conceived of as a "desire-that-gives" (Cixous 1976, 893), as a gift which reciprocates receiving and produces pleasure (Cixous and Kuhn 1981, 53), or as a different "eros dynamic" (Cixous 1976, 893) which prioritises feminine drives and wants over appropriating masculine equivalents. However, as this

practice-led research revealed, my practice benefits considerably when I employ terminology which goes "beyond the categories of sex (woman and man)" (Wittig 1981, 19). To this end, I again turned to the field of language-based playwriting, and discovered in Castagno's codification the term "governance through sharing" which satisfactorily, and unproblematically, could be applied to the structural and theoretical principles at work within *Jump for Jordan*:

> From the playwright's standpoint, the creation of the dialogic play can be construed analogically as a way of governance through sharing. Some have sensed its political corollary in pure nontotalitarian Marxism, which argues that "sharing is not only an ethical or economic mandate, but a condition built into the structure of human perception, and thus a condition inherent in the very fact of being human." (Castagno referencing Holquist, 2001, 14)

This terminology returned me to the Marxist and materialist roots of my playwriting practice, and affirmed a shared and ethical human capacity, rather than valorised "the powers inherent in Women's biology and sexuality" (Case 1988, 73). It also helpfully evokes a scientific symbiosis, which accords with my experience of *Jump for Jordan*'s structural evolution from a mechanism to an organism.

Jump for Jordan does have a recognition scene (scene 36), an anagnorisis of sorts in which the protagonist confronts her history (Keyssar 1996, 118), and awakens and applies the analytical skills acquired during her archaeological studies. However, this scene does not signify a discovery of a true and fixed nature or "core identity" (119), and is not the final word on her passage from ignorance to knowledge. Instead, I would argue that the "performance of transformation" (Keyssar 1996, 119) of the character of Sophia, the continuous staging of the interactions and shifts within her field of being, eclipses the recognition scene in dramaturgical significance. Rather than find herself, Sophia finds herself "becoming other" (119). She is newly alive to the processes of her own psyche as she rolls with the punches of her day to day world, newly able to transform images and categorisations of herself, and of the Other.

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